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Wii™

Letter from the Editor

Killer instinct

Play writer Greg Orlando described Dead Rising 2 as "so awesome it will eradicate world hunger." Fellow writer Casey Loe, who actually saw the game in person and corroborated its potential awesomeness, demanded that we grant Dead Rising 2 a four-page feature opportunity, which you can read all about, starting on page 44.

I've seen nothing of Dead Rising 2 outside of the screenshots on the page, but I do know that the original Dead Rising was awesome, grinding up zombies with a lawnmower from the hardware store was awesome, and one of my favorite titles of this generation of gaming is getting a sequel with 14 times more zombies. Greg does have a point: something BIG is on the way.

Not everyone is as excited as we are. There are already people proclaiming Dead Rising 2 will be a disaster, because get this: a team of game makers from Canada, called Blue Castle Games, who used to make baseball games, have been assigned the task of making an anticipated sequel to a hit game that was born and raised by internal Capcom Japan. Capcom hands over the property to an unknown. Respect.

I like the idea of a successful game treading outside its original designers for the sequel. This industry likes to return to the same creaky well time and time again. Why not allow someone else to play with the visions of the original creators, adapting and forming something widely new yet comfortably familiar?

While shifting a property from Japanese hands to Western hands carries a different set of possibilities and questions, Bethesda recently decided to take a similar approach with Fallout, handing the franchise over to Obsidian, which is best known for Star Wars. People are questioning this move too, but it's time to get over the antiquated notion that gamemaking must follow a rigid path to greatness.

It's hard to keep an open mind when creative shifts threaten to rearrange the landscape you've become accustomed to and even fallen in love with. It's nice to stay safe and secure rather than take risks. Take a look at the new Star Trek movie, which trades in cerebral intentions and painterly views for high volume and tens of millions of dollars of lavish effects. Alienate one crowd while opening up a new level of Trekkie; or show the old crowd something new and unexpected. You never know… (Here's where we can dissect that other sci-fi obsession Star Wars and go where no short editorial should go.)

Newsweek put a wispy Enterprise on their cover the last week of April, expressing "how Star Trek taught us to dream big." I'd like to think that gamemakers and those who experience their wonders are a big part of the new age of dreamers. Developer Brandon Justice says it well, in his Developer Soundoff on page 10: "It's about those dirty, dangerous notions like hope, imagination, and yes, even satisfaction. It's about exploring new worlds, rising above impossible situations, and enjoying experiences with some of my best friends in tow."

"...it's also about taking a chainsaw into a shambling horde of zombies..."

And it's also about taking a chainsaw into a shambling horde of zombies and turning dreams into bloody nightmares! Whatever the next game to take you away…

Godspeed!

~Brady Fiechter

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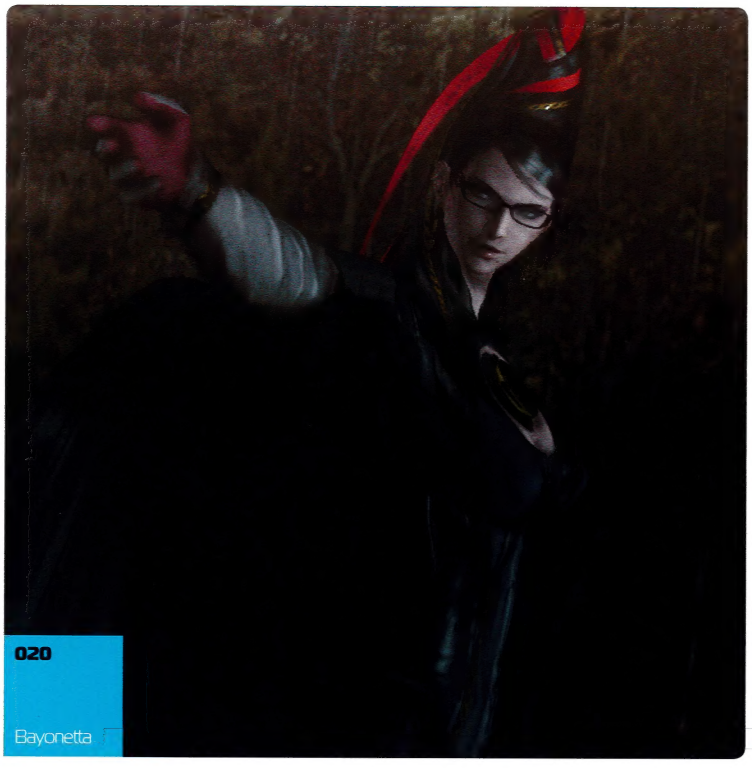
June 2009



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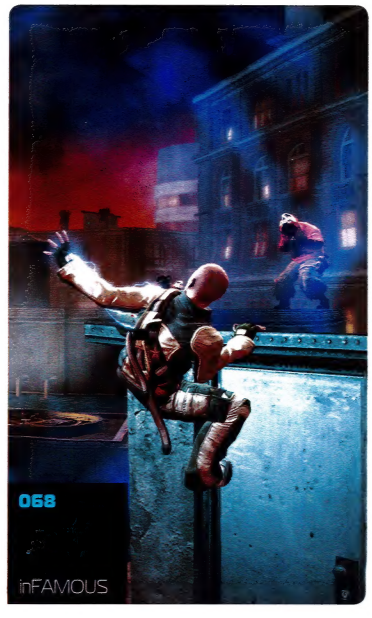

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ink

news | trends | gossip | assorted nonsense

Play Game, Place Bet, Make Money

WorldGaming.com shows you the cash: got what it takes?

You like competitive gaming. You like to place bets. You like to win. You will like Worldgaming.com, where gamers from around the world can get together and slap down cash to up the ante on online gaming matches.

"We realized that we needed a way to bring competitive gamers from all over the world and introduce them to other like-minded gamers," explains WorldGaming president Billy Levy. "Gamers should not have to worry about who's on the other end of the connection; all their focus should be on the game itself and the only way to do this is to guarantee that their opponent has the same mind-set. We feel through WorldGaming.com's Skill Rating and Reputation Rating that we have accomplished this. It's not always about the allure of money or cash prizes to our users; it's about spirited competition and the ability to get a game anytime of the day against a user with a similar skill set."

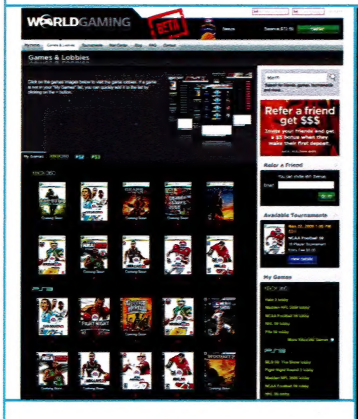
Getting into a match is extremely intuitive, with a slick interface that puts the focus on the thrill of the game and cuts the fat. "Ease of use is the number one issue that is always on our mind … If you've ever played a game online," says Levy, "you know it's merely 3-4 clicks of the A Button (Xbox 360 controller) to enter into an online game, whether it's *Madden Football* or *Halo*. WorldGaming.com simply adopted this process and added its own twist."

As it stands now, maximum bets are $1,000 a side, with Worldgaming.com taking 10 percent, with a cap of $25. Tournament gaming also comes into the mix, where you don't have to win the whole thing to grab a piece of the pot, merely get out of the first round.

"When creating the payout structure, Zack and I were very eager to change this trend, for it really is only advantageous for 2 people, one is the winner of the tournament and the other is the tournament provider," says Levy. "How is it fair that the tournament provider should make more money than 80% of the field?"

While the allure of the site is certainly its betting structure, you can get into competitions that aren't set up for cash. This is a community for gamers as well. "We will also be launching a feature to all of our users called the Gamer Training Institute where real gaming pros for all game genres put out tips and tricks on how to become a better overall player," says Levy. "There will be video walkthroughs along with screen shots and detailed write ups that our pros have put together to help our users feel more comfortable about their gaming skills."

WorldGaming.com just wrapped up a college tour across the country in April, with a fall tour expected to expand to several more venues.



Whether one-one, team or tournament play, there's money to be made...

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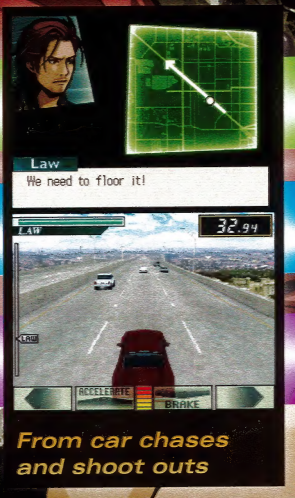
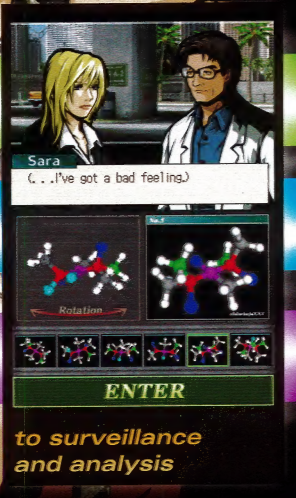


From car chases and shoot outs



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playback

letters@playmagazine.com

"Now, I know what it is to be hardcore. I've stood in the rainy lines..."

So, bottom line, the Wii IS the GameCube, relaunched with motion controls and built-in (under-used and suffocating) online connectivity. The PlayStation 3 is a hulking conglomerate of mass media entertainment, overpowered and under-used with the ability to play games thrown in for good measure. The Xbox 360 is a next generation system launched two years before the last generation ended, and at this point, is losing ground among the others. The Nintendo DS is for babies. Wii is full of shovelware. The PS2 will just not die. PS3 is too expensive.

Are you tired of seeing articles like this in your game mags and game sites?

Me too.I'm also tired of seeing long-winded, deliberately high-brow-worded articles on the "merit" of video games as art, the fall of "real" gaming to the "casual market," and this overall elitism "real gamers" feel towards the rest of mass media entertainment. In the end, for me, a video game should be JUST THAT: A video game! An interactive media experience with a goal and reward system, that I can play with an input device!

Sure, they can be art; Okami and Braid prove that there can be visual and dramatic appeal within a game and still make it an enjoyable experience. But just because Boom Blox, Onenchanbara, or Ratchet and Clank aren't art or drama driven games, doesn't make them any less fun. (And by the way, for those of you who think those games are art, they aren't. Stop lying to yourself.) On the flip side of that though, just because a game is dramatic and story driven, that doesn't mean it CAN'T be enjoyable either. God of War and Dreamfall are just as enjoyable as Cooking Mama and Tetris.

As far as the whole "new" casual trend, stop it. Stop telling yourselves and all your other message board buddies that the casual game trend will be the downfall of gaming. First of all it's not new... And secondly, it's been with gaming from the start. Pong was made as a home game that could be played with the rest of your family and friends. It's based a freakin' table tennis, for Christ sakes! Do you know why Pac-Man and Bubble Bobble have food in them? The developers wanted to find the most common denominator between a boyfriend and a girlfriend so that the couple would want to play TOGETHER! They figured boys and girls enjoy eating food together on dates, why not introduce that same concept in a video game? "Hardcore" games were born from that same generation, and "hardcore" games will continue to be born this generation as well, no matter how many Wii hyphen insert real life simulation heres are thrown at us. In a year where Wii-Fit was one of the top-selling games, Gears of War 2 still managed to be developed... Imagine that!

And when it comes to this feeling that a lot of gamers have as far as games vs. movies, there really is no comparison. You get a different feeling when you WATCH The Dark Knight as opposed to PLAYING LittleBigPlanet. And yeah, guess what? You liked both experiences. Neither media form has to justify itself to the other. And that goes for books and the like as well.

I just read an article in PLAY from a reader that called for a split between gamers who believed in the emotional, art, and purpose driven games and the gamers who believed gameplay comes before anything, visuals be damned, as long as the game is compelling to play. While I lean more heavily towards the latter, I think a split (As well as the current one already fervent in the current game community between console fanboys, and between "casual" and "core" gamers) is a DANGEROUS thing.

Games should be games. And if playing Barbie Island Princess The Game makes you feel good and keeps you coming back, than by all means play it! If Final Fantasy X makes you cry like a little baby, please, weep! If you wanna unleash your inner space marine, fragging and sniping anyone who so much as even walks into Coagulation on Halo, then by all means kill that newbie bitch!

Play what compels you and enjoy it!

They are video GAMES people!

And while I could ramble on about the whole idea of a fun game and a good game being two mutually exclusive ideas, that's another blog.

They are meant to be entertainment. And if you are entertained, than shut the hell up and play!

Are you not entertained?!

-MaxPlastic

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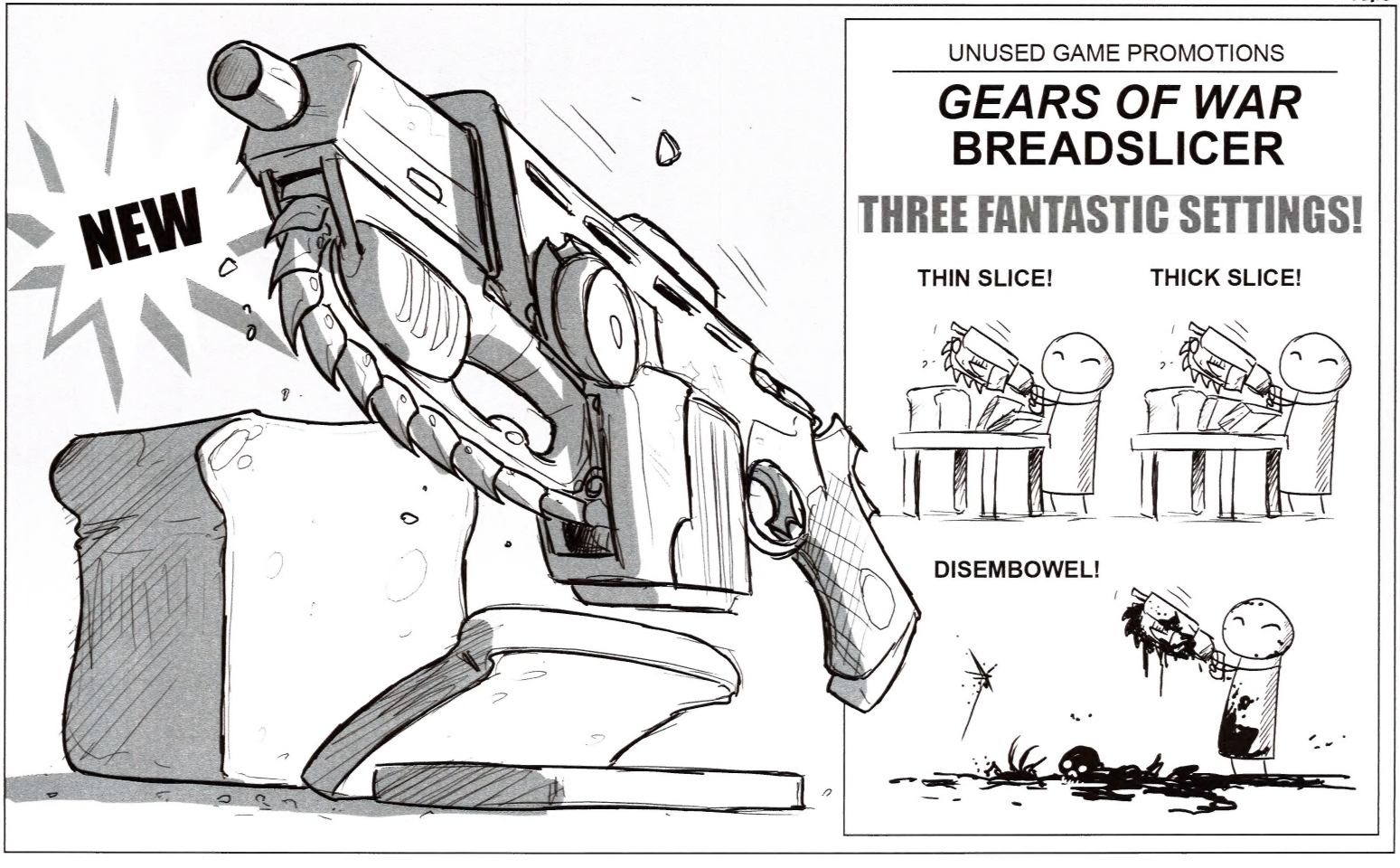

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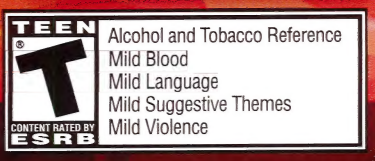

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Gaming Gone By
File #004

words Eric L. Patterson

A Month of Mascots
1991 / 1996

When it comes to the world of video game mascots, the month of June holds at least two moments of great significance.

The first came on June 23rd, 1991: the day Sega released Sonic the Hedgehog for the Genesis in both North America and Europe (with the Japanese release following just over one month later). Sega had beaten Nintendo to the punch when it came to entering the 16-bit race, but they knew that the threat of a follow-up to the immensely successful Nintendo Entertainment System loomed over their heads. In coming up with tactics to fight off their juggernaut rival Nintendo and to try to create a platform the customer base would more eagerly embrace, one of the decisions made was that Sega needed a mascot they could use to counteract Nintendo's beloved Mario.

In early 1990, a small group at Sega Japan christened themselves "Sonic Team" and went on to create what would end up being the second-most popular title ever released for Sega's mega console (only being beaten by the game's sequel, Sonic the Hedgehog 2). Sonic the Hedgehog was a perfect example of "right place, right time", as the spiky blue mammal with an attitude provided exactly what Sega needed and gave the world a character that could truly give Mario a run for his money.

It seems only fitting that five years later, that exact same date–June 23rd–would provide for another milestone in the platforming-mascot wars: the first introduction to the world of Super Mario 64, which hit Japanese store shelves on June 23, 1996. Super Mario 64 was the first title to completely move Nintendo's famous plumber to the brave new world of three dimensions, and it forever changed not only many of the fundamental ideas of how 3D gaming should work, but also the entire world of video gaming itself.

While the Nintendo 64's main competitors–the Sega Saturn and Sony PlayStation–had stuck to the idea of traditional d-pad control, Super Mario 64 instantly proved to anyone who tried it how important of a factor the existence of an analog control stick was in the switch from 2D to 3D gaming. As well, the game also brought with it the idea of a "free" camera that could be controlled by the player, a move that went against the previously-held opinion that the camera for 3D games should be locked by the developer to certain positions or pre-determined paths.

Fightin' the Good Fight

We regret to inform fans of Faith Fighter that the game's maker, Molleindustria, will no longer offer players the chance to take their favorite religious icons and battle it out in the virtual arena to determine who will be the next champion of the world. In a release on their web site: "Today after an official statement by the Organization of Islamic Conference (OIC) we decided to remove the game Faith Fighter from our site."

At the OIC site, the official statement read: "When his attention was brought to an internet report posted by metro.co.uk on an online game depicting holy figures such as Prophet Jesus and Prophet Muhammad (PBUT) fighting each other to the death, a spokesman of the OIC Islamophobia Observatory in Jeddah today expressed his concern stating that the computer game was incendiary in its content and offensive to Muslims and Christians.

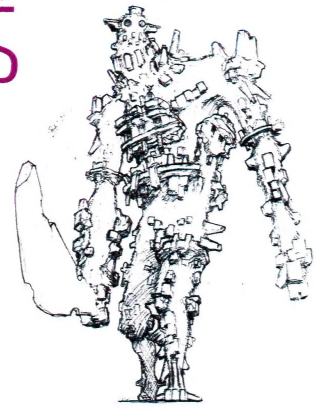
He said that the game would serve no other purpose than to incite intolerance. He called on the Internet service providers who are hosting the game to take immediate action by withdrawing it from the web."

Molleindustria went on to say, "Taking down the game from this website is a symbolic act: copies and documentation of Faith Fighter can be found all over the Internet. Hopefully this will help people to make their judgments by examining the actual work and not the sensationalist accounts spread by mass media."

But wait, there's more! After the ping-ponging of controversial counterstrikes, Faith Fighter 2 was unexpectedly announced, promising you "a positive, nonviolent educational game that teaches the universal values of tolerance and respect. This is a very simple game that can be played by children of all ages, religious leaders and even journalists!"

If Faith Fighter 2 isn't your thing, take a look at Operation: Pedopriest, a game about deflecting sex abuse scandals, or the recommended Oiligarchy, in which you take control of your own oil-drilling regime.

BiTS



Konami drops publishing rights to Six Days in Fallujah, a console shooter based on the war in Iraq

Shadow the Colossus to become a feature film

Apple pulls Baby Shaker app, which offered you the opportunity to shake a screaming baby to death

Marvel vs Capcom 2 coming exclusively to PSN and XBLA

Average game salary in 2008 was $79,000

Square-Enix reveals worldwide sales figures: Final Fantasy has sold 85 million units, Dragon Quest 47 million units, Kingdom Hearts 12 million units

Tomb Raider comes in at 30 million units sold

Bioware applies filter to lock out words like "gay" and "lesbian" and other homosexual references from its Star Wars: The Old Republic forum posts, stating that "these are terms that do not exist in Star Wars," at which point fans pointed out that Bioware was wrong, at which point Bioware said their apologies and removed the filter

Taser International sues Second Life developer Linden Labs for $75,000, claiming the use of its brand in the virtual world is tarnishing because of the adult content that sometimes goes on in the game

The original GameBoy celebrates its 20th Year Anniversary, having been released on April 21, 1989

Douglas Gentile of Iowa State University claims that 8.5 percent of American gamers ages 8 to 18 who display clear signs of addiction—and most of these are boys

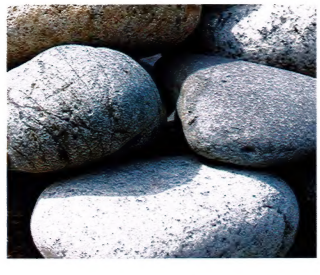
Killzone 2 sells 1 million

The "E74" error, which has afflicted a few Play staff and is basically another Xbox 360 red-ring-of-death issue, has now been officially put on the list of warranty coverage by Microsoft

The PS3 outsells the Wii in the first time in Japan

Rockin' the DS

You can do a lot with rocks, like put them in fountains for decoration, skip them across a calm summer lake, even crush them up and make pavement and cement. You can even put rocks inside a Nintendo DS box, somehow get it on the shelves of Walmart, and imagine the horror when a hapless teenager gets his prize and finds that it ain't a DS. According to WTSP-TV, a Lake Wales, Florida mom bought her son a DS from the local super chain, only to find the poor birthday-boy confused when out came a pile of stones wrapped in a Chinese newspaper. Reportedly, Walmart ended up discovering the DS had been recently returned, and refunded the woman in full and gave her a $20 gift card for the bizarre mistake.



NPD GROUP

DATABASE

JUNE 2009

Top 10 Console Game Sales March 2009

01	Resident Evil 5	Capcom USA	**Xbox360**	938k
02	Pokemon Platinum Version	Nintendo of America	**NDS**	805k
03	Halo Wars	Microsoft	**Xbox 360**	639k
04	Resident Evil 5	Capcom USA	**PS3**	585k
05	Wii Fit w/balance board	Nintendo of America	**Wii**	541k
06	MLB 09 The Show	Sony	**PS3**	305k
07	Killzone 2	Sony	**PS3**	296k
08	Wii Play w/remote	Nintendo	**Wii**	281k
09	Mario Kart w/wheel Nintendo of America Wii 278k	SCEA	**PS3**	385k
10	Major League Baseball 2K9	Take 2 Interactive	**Xbox 360**	205k

01 Resident Evil 5

Hardware Units March 2009

PlayStation 2	112k
PlayStation3	218k
PSP	168k
Xbox 360	330k
Wii	601k
Nintendo DS	563k

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On Banter, Babies and the Inadvisable Nature of Rattle-Throwing

words Brandon Justice

Recently, there's been a lot of talk about the root of our industry's creative crisis. Many say we're running out ideas. Some claim the lull is largely due to increased complexity and the corresponding cost. Others still say it's a problem of high-end products outstripping the average button-bashing meatsack's ability to adapt.

But to date, my favorite has to be the assertion of a fringe journalist that game designers are a bunch of chest-beating, cock-measuring, mental midgets incapable of an emotional evolution due to the inevitable inadequacy of their gender. I believe the exact quote was:

*"It's not that the medium is in its adolescence, it's that you're a bunch of f***ing adolescents. It's even worse because you're technically supposed to be adults."*

The punch-drunk pundit went on to say that it's because we're boys, and boys are afraid of big bad wolves like "responsibility" and "feelings." And while I whole-heartedly agree with said wordsmith's assertion that games need to grow up; hell, I'll even begrudgingly nod at the notion that a good number of us could stand a healthy dose of adulthood—I just can't believe someone with any knowledge of the way this industry works would ever let something so shamelessly sexist…so, so… undeniably *demeaning* out of their mouth in a public forum.

Further, having let the matter simmer down in my brain for the better part of six weeks, it occurs to me that the problem is not exclusive to prejudiced, small-minded headline hounds who apparently get off on insulting people in the hopes that someone will consider them relevant—it's actually a disease that eats at almost every conceivable end of this industry.

"I can't speak for everyone, but personally, game development has always been a bit more important than units sold or market growth."

The problem in a nutshell? Ignorance.

To be frank, most of these folks just don't have any idea what they're talking about. Sure, they may play a lot of games, and many get more face time with this industry's top talent than the people on their own dev teams do, but despite it all, they're still rather clueless when it comes to the exact nature of the beast that binds us.

In that sense, this month's carefully considered caffeine confession all comes back to a clever bit of quotation from one of my favorite films:

"There are two types of people: those that talk the talk and those that walk the walk. People who walk the walk sometimes talk the talk but most times they don't talk at all, 'cause they walkin'. Now, people who talk the talk, when it comes time for them to walk the walk, you know what they do? They talk people like me into walkin' for them." – Key, Hustle and Flow

Now, I know and respect a great number of the folks who cover this industry. Many are close friends, and there are some that I'd hire at the drop of a hat if I ever started my own dev studio. All accolades and attachments aside, however, the truth is that no matter how much you think you know, unless you're *in it*, walking that walk, it's very tough to truly understand the things that keep gaming from being what it ought to be.

Put simply, the problem with game development is not limited to or really even rooted in the means, motives, or mind of game developers themselves.

It's much, much deeper than that.

I won't pretend to have adequate time or talent to define it here, but after almost a decade, I can tell ya this much: It's never as easy as you think it will be. Further, it's rarely as easy as it *should* be. Beyond that, the final say on who makes what is almost never up to the roving band of emotional troglodytes our fanatical friend claims are responsible for the dumbing down of digital media.

In fact, those calls tend to be made by people just like her.

And who are they? Smart, talented, ambitious, articulate folks with perfectly good intentions. Folks who, because of these traits, tend to think they know a whole lot more than they actually do. Folks who don't live and breathe game development. Folks who lack first-hand experience trying to get a game green-lit from the bottom of the proverbial totem pole. Folks who haven't spent any significant time in the trenches; painstakingly crafting these unsightly exercises in mental masturbation that are supposedly rotting the country's core culture from the inside out.

They've never created, crunched on, cut down, or otherwise built a game from the ground up, so it's somewhat hard to expect them to understand. Sure, they hit all the trade shows, read a lot of sales sheets, and talk a lot about the future of the business, but at the end of the day?

It's not the same.

The fact of the matter is that there is a big difference between talking about it and actually doing it. There's a huge gap between tracking trends or interviewing a few key executives and trying to convince someone who doesn't know, play or even *like* games to put millions of dollars behind something that just maaaaay beat the odds and have an emotional impact on the industry.

In truth, most of us long for something more substantial. We'd love to do something different. We'd love the freedom to explore the nature of our medium. Unfortunately, the realities of the business are such that this type of self-discovery continues to crawl along in spite of the universal thought that there has to be more to gaming than explosions, exposed breasts, and an endless sea of zombified alien Nazis hellbent on our hero's destruction.

The trick is getting that chance, and in that department, we're still clearly struggling.

Adolescent or no, at least the majority of us understand that much. What's more, we respect the people who sacrifice their time, their talent, and in many senses, there very *lives* to pushing this thing forward at a time when the majority of the industry's stakeholders are applauding the market potential of low-end products that do little more than drag us back to the days of our inception to gain an all-important do-over with consumers.

I can't speak for everyone, but personally, game development has always been a bit more important than units sold or market growth. It's about those dirty, dangerous notions like hope, imagination, and yes, even satisfaction. It's about exploring new worlds, rising above impossible situations, and enjoying experiences with some of my best friends in tow.

If that makes me an irresponsible, incorrigible Toys 'R Us kid, then that's a badge I'll proudly wear for as long as I possibly can.

And I'm not going to claim that we couldn't be further along in the journey. I'm not here to say the industry's view of our primary product as a toy wasn't well-earned. I'm just saying that the next time you feel like lashing out against the tyranny of gaming toddlers, you might want to do so in a way that doesn't make you look like you're even more comfortable draped in diapers than the folks you so blindly condemn.

Lord knows my blood pressure would applaud the effort.

Brandon Justice has a custom-built playpen to contain his youthful exuberance as Design Director for the fine folks at Quick Hit Sports. Feel free to call him a big baby at bjustice@quickhit.com.

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Gamer Culture

words Evan Shamoon

Game Boy Plushies

In this age of DIY product design, it's tough to throw a rock on the Internet without hitting some sort of customized, retro videogame creation. But rarely are they this awesome: someone named 'cloud sparrow' is now taking orders via Etsy for these supersweet Game Boy plushies, made of hand-stitched felt and standing at about 12" tall. The whole thing is hand-crafted, and will certainly bring some 8-bit love to whatever living room it inhabits. Oh, and even better, you get to customize your specs when you order: color, size, alterations, etc.—$35 for the twelve-incher.

Digital Wallpaper

If you're like us and constantly up at the wee hours of the morning scouring the Interwebs for videogame-related wallpaper to adorn your computer's desktop, look no further: Desktop Gaming has compiled the most comprehensive collection you've ever seen. It's mostly of the retro, 8-bit variety—choice offerings are available from the likes of Chrono Trigger, Mike Tyson's Punch Out, and everything Mario—and it's available in various screen sizes to fit your monitor's native resolution. If you're looking for something a bit more modern, check out Mikaël Aguirre's spectacular collection of custom jobbies, with contemporary takes on all your favorites. Now get some sleep.

http://desktopgaming.com/
http://orioto.deviantart.com/gallery/#Videogame-Remakes

Hang with Katamari

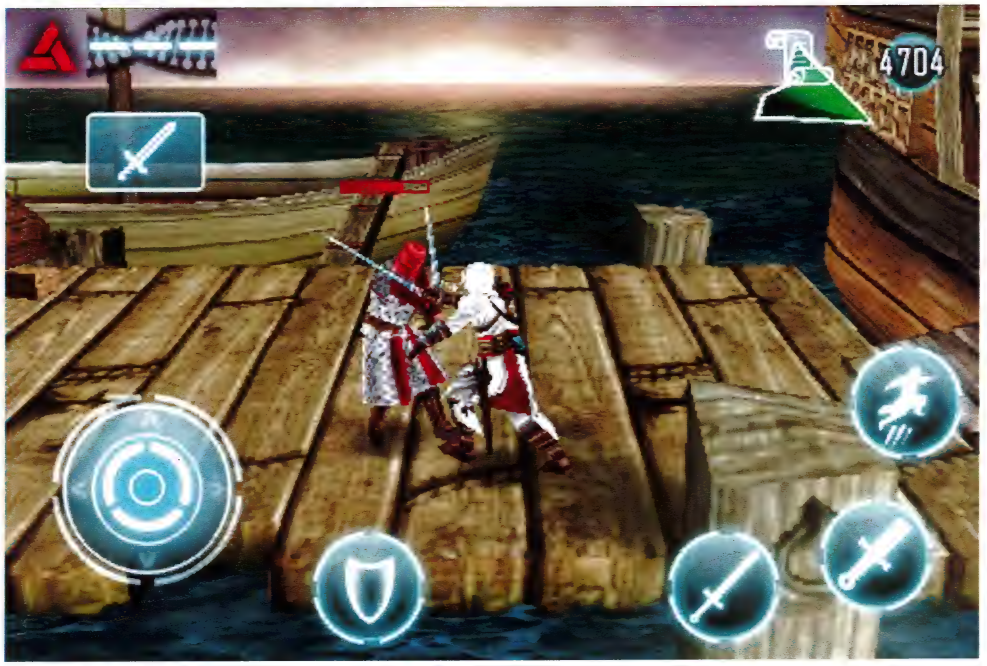
Also on the DIY tip (but already sold, sadly) comes this repurposed painting with one major addition: A huge Katamari ball peeking out from behind the mountains. These 20x16" acrylic-on-stretched-canvas jams have already been sold, but creator "loudxmouse" says that he's open to more of them being commissioned. Alternatively, you may just want to attempt to make your own: swing by any neighborhood tag sale, snag a generic "pastoral life scene" painting, and do your worstest.

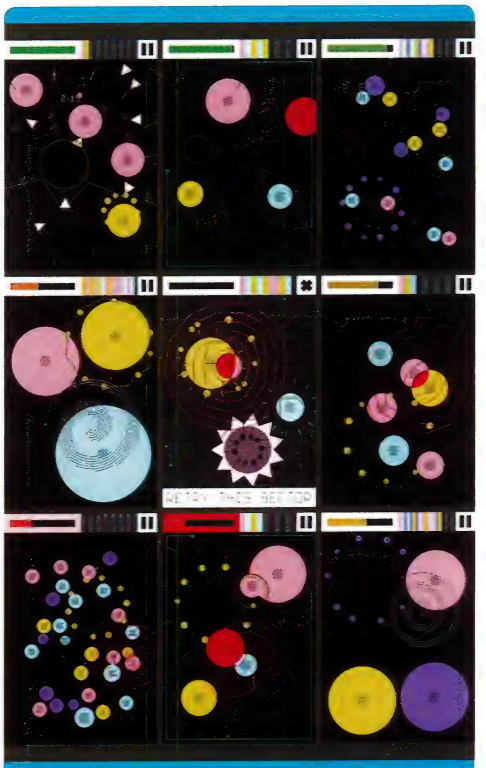
iPhone GAMING

words Evan Shamoon

Mini Assassins

In what is one of the first examples of a AAA, big-budget action game making the leap to the iPhone, Gameloft will be publishing Assassin's Creed for the device later this month. While details are a bit scarce, Altair's acrobatics are to be controlled with on-screen "virtual controls," and the game will draw largely from Altair's Chronicles for the Nintendo DS.





Eliss

When you think of "music games," the first thing to spring to mind is usually something like Guitar Hero or Rock Band. But the genre has so much more to offer, as demonstrated by media designer Steph Thirion, who has recently released his latest project, Eliss, to the App store.

A finalist in this year's Independent Games Festival, Eliss is a game in which the player must "keep up harmony in an odd universe made of blendable planets" (in the words of its creator). You'll be touch-controlling multiple planets at once, melding them together into giant orbs, and split them up into tiny dwarf planets; it's all very abstract and surreal, and reflects the unique point of view of Thirion, who has won awards for his experimental web sites. Spread across 20 levels (each of which requires its own creative strategies), the game will set you back four bucks.

www.toucheliss.com

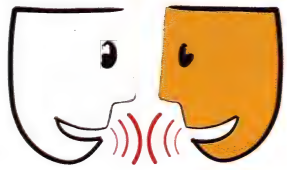
It's Official

As Apple began its final march towards to 1 billion iPhone apps downloaded from the iTunes Store over the Easter weekend, the company also revealed the 'All-Time Top Paid Apps,' and 'All-Time Top Free Apps.' And games dominate in both categories, particularly those that cost money: Crash Bandicoot Nitro Kart 3D topped the list of paid apps, with 15 of the 20 apps being games.

A week earlier, a US-focused study from comScore, a market research firm, found that Tapulous's Tap Tap Revenge, the most popular iTunes game, had been installed by a staggering 32 per cent of iPhone owners. Granted, the app is free; still, it's very rare to see any game on any platform with that sort of penetration, and it hints at a larger trend: the iPhone is going to be a huge player in the world of gaming.

romeo_check_fail

Block 006:
World In My Eyes



words Eric-Jon Rössel Waugh

> "Game mechanics shape the player's experience by sketching a notion of a world."

Videogames serve to communicate ideas—granted as does, on some level, all else we do. Yet as a language, that is their explicit purpose. It is why they exist.

An art form is a language that serves to study a particular form, or quality, of the observable world, in respect to the observer—and then to apply that knowledge, deliberately or not, to communicate with the observer. If you're going to sculpt, then any art is going to come from your use of space.

The ideas that videogames best serve to communicate are therefore both dictated by and inextricable from the form this communication takes. With videogames, that form is cause and effect: ping, pong; the fundamental way we understand our world.

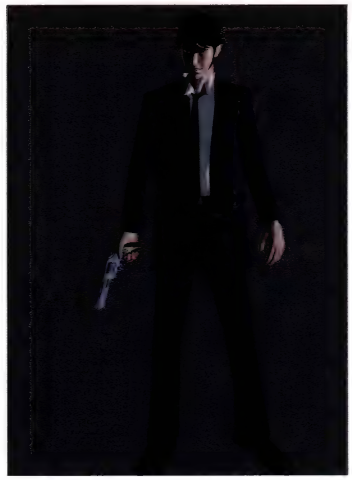
Though it's popular to do so, there is no picking apart design to glorify your favorite elements; everything in a design is equally important, in service of the goal of communication (so long as it does indeed aid that goal). Game mechanics shape the player's experience by sketching a notion of a world. The player's gradual understanding of this world forms a narrative, leading to an emotional response. This response provides context for all that has happened, making it relevant on a human level. You neglect any of these steps, you're not saying anything important.

Mechanics, however, are the backbone, and therefore a sensible place to begin. Whereas videogames serve to communicate ideas, game mechanics are the grammar that ties all the expressive elements together, allowing that communication to happen.

Any language capable of abstract expression has a grammar. The difference with artistic languages is that they're more subliminal. If our consciousness is Windows and English is, say, HTML, with maybe a bit of Flash mixed in, then painting or composing a sonata is like programming in machine code. It's all below the surface, bypassing the rational mind.

You know how a person can tell you twenty times not to slam the door, lest you knock everything off the shelf—and somehow it doesn't sink in until you slam the door and it all comes crashing down? Real learning is sub-articulate; all our efforts to rationalize and verbalize what we know can do little more than point a flashing arrow at the truth—because in their precision our words are abstract, and for all their ineffability our experiences are concrete to us. We know what we've seen and done, even if we can't explain it, and we organize it and we file it all away for later reference.

What the grammar of any particular art does is it handshakes with our



subconscious tendency for pattern recognition—this hyperlinked cloud of metaphor that allows us to connect disconnected ideas and spin ourselves a greater web of understanding, recognizing threats and opportunities, often without knowing exactly why or how it's happening. We'll call it intuition, and make Jung a happy ghost.

To be effective and elegant, then, any expression within a medium is best expressed through the language of that medium rather than layered on top in some literal outline. The more precise and defined you get, the more detached you become from intuition and the less real meaning gets through to your audience. If you leave room for implication, and allow your audience to fill in the blanks, they will own any understanding that develops, and be in an immediate position to apply this understanding —both within the framework of your discussion and within the broader framework of their life.

In the case of videogames, any expression that does not come out of the active interplay of cause and effect is an effective failure to communicate. Text boxes, cutscenes, narration—they can be fun ornaments. As Robert McKee would say of cinematic voiceover, however, as narrative tools they are flaccid. They don't do the work, and they don't demand the work of the audience. That is to say, whatever communication does not involve the player acting, then realizing the consequences of his actions, is telling, not showing.

Classic example: Super Mario Bros., world 1-1. Not a word in sight (aside from the counters up top). Nothing limiting the player's actions, except the opportunity to act. The player starts on a 2D plane in the middle of nowhere; he can run to the right or left. The screen doesn't scroll left, which tells the player he must run to the right. After running for a moment, the player encounters an enemy. Touch it and die. With only so many options, eventually the player will figure out how to jump over the enemy. Immediately after learning to jump, the player will encounter a bunch of shiny objects in the sky. And so on.

Within one or two minutes, the game has taught the player almost everything there is to know of his options—simply through psychology; through allowing the player to make his own decisions within a limited framework, then anticipating the player's reaction and playing to that. The limitations are honest; right from the start, the player is allowed to run and jump. The only thing the game does is then seed in implications to this behavior.

The game will continue to do so, if more subtly, for several levels. Most of the game is, in fact, a canvas of suggestions for the player. "Imagine what you can do with this," the game says. "Work it out. It'll be cool." By game's end, the player will be a master of running and jumping, and know the game's psychology inside out. (Which is pretty much what The Lost Levels serves to subvert.)

This is not an especially profound example. Super Mario Bros. isn't meant to represent or communicate anything beyond its own whimsy. We can read in some broad analogies to our own lives, but generally we digest and accept the world for what it is, then move on with our lives. And fair enough; the game was made twenty-four years ago.

So why, over the last two and a half decades, has design both largely remained static and become so much less efficient at communicating? It's because in the ambition to do more, say more, with the medium—and to attract people who are more familiar with film and television than videogames—expression has become divorced from the actual fabric of the medium. Which we'll talk about next month.

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INSIDE CRYTEK'S CRYENGINE 3

FOR THE GRAPHICS WHORE IN ALL OF US

words Mike Griffin

It brings me great pleasure to report that Crytek has at last created an engine built from the ground up to run on consoles, and CryEngine 3 demos appear to be running a brand-new Crysis title in real-time on one's Xbox 360 and PS3 machines. Justice for all! Built by amazing developers who are actively making games for it—including recently acquired Free Radical, now a Crytek studio, CryEngine 3 aims to provide the pinnacle of bleeding-edge engine tech on consoles and PC. It's time to see what you've been missing. I recently had an opportunity to discuss CryEngine 3's expansion to console with Crytek's Michael Kopietz, Lead Programmer.

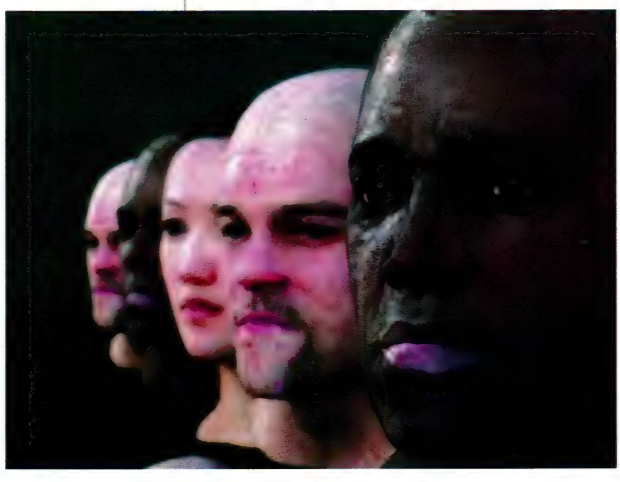
INTERVIEW
Q&A Michael Kopietz – Lead Programmer, Crytek

play: So console players are finally going to have a proper Crytek experience. This is great. How tough has it been to overcome the 512 MB total memory of the 360 and PS3, after you've become so accustomed to a high memory PC environment?
Michael: The goal we set for CryEngine 3 was not only to fit into 512 MB, often accomplished by cutting on the content side, but to keep the high texture, geometry and physics quality, and also to serve up a loading-free game experience, like we've shown in recent demos. To achieve this we've implemented a streaming solution which is not just a drop-in into the engine, but rather integrated deeply into CryEngine 3's memory management and rendering.

How do you balance and optimize for different storage configurations now that you're fully multi-platform?
CryEngine 3 is capable of scaling well from consoles that just support a DVD drive, up to systems with hard disks, by using not fully utilized CPU-cores and SPUs to decompress data directly to final memory destinations, avoiding wasteful temporary copies—if the platform supports it.

Touching on memory again, does one RAM configuration work better than the other, in terms of the 360's unified 512 MB versus the bi-directional 256/256 MB in PS3?
The performance of both memory systems is quite comparable. On one hand you have twice the bandwidth for the GPU on PS3, on the other hand you also have to use the GPU for the backbuffer and z-buffer—while the 360 only needs to read resources from its unified memory. But having two memory pools on PS3 was actually not a problem during the design and implementation of CryEngine 3, as the memory configuration of our dev kits gave us some breathing room to work with. While we were getting closer to our internal milestone to run on final console configurations, our new streaming system and memory management came along nicely. So we could manage different resource types—like compressed and uncompressed assets—in various pools, which made it kind of 'free' to locate them in two separate address-spaces on PS3.

"The goal is basically to ensure that anything we have in single player also works in multiplayer."



How do you guys classify the 360 and PS3 shader capabilities? Are there certain effects or shader techniques that one GPU is better at?
I don't think it's enough to look at the shader system to classify the generation of a GPU. If we look back at the last generation of consoles, the Xbox had what we'd call shaders, while the PS2 didn't. But the Vector Units of the PS2 gave you a degree of freedom that no shader system provided up to today, leading both consoles to a head-to-head fight for visual quality until the current consoles arrived. From a developer's point of view, I'd say it's similar in this generation.

So what you're saying is, specs aren't everything…
Yeah, some architecture design or raw math power data might lead us to a hasty conclusion about the 360 and PS3 GPUs, but working with both of them makes it less and less black and white. Our goal is not to run twice as fast on one specific console, but to take the optimization opportunities they offer us and bring them to the same level of quality and performance.
Examples of this are post effects: the 360 GPU dedicates all shader work to pixel processing, allowing you more complex effects in the same amount of time. While the PS3 offers you an old-school trick: using the same memory area simultaneously for framebuffer and textures, avoiding redundant memory copies and getting more advanced blending operations using shaders, resulting in just as complex effects in the same amount of time.

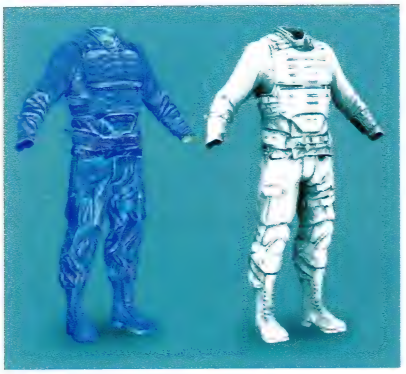
You don't hear as much distress over the Cell processor lately, in terms of how difficult it is to exploit the Cell in the PS3. Maybe it's a non-issue these days. How does CryEngine 3 maximize the Cell, compared to the more traditional processor in the 360?
I must say, the first time I was reading the statements of Cevat Yerli, one of the owners of Crytek, about a completely new way Crytek would tackle the Cell challenge, I wondered what kind of magic it might be. When I started to work at Crytek I was really surprised. Of course the physics, animations, rendering, streaming, etcetera, is running on SPUs, probably like many advanced engines, but CryEngine 3 wasn't just built to have this static utilization of the SPUs to ship our own games. Rather, it's designed to let our licenses write their own SPU code in an easy fashion that no other engine offers.

Is CryEngine 3 future-proofed against other unorthodox multi-core processors like the Cell, or do you think future console designs will choose more conventional CPUs, closer to PC parts?
I think we're going to see more heterogeneous

multi-processing solutions both in the console and PC spaces. Things like course-grained vs. fine-grained parallelism offer different trade-offs regarding flexibility, speed, power consumption, cost. So there's no perfect solution for all computing problems, the same way there's no perfect answer to what car, laptop or even games console to buy; you're always trading off price vs. performance. What's clear from PS3 is the problem of a new system that is overly difficult to program: you can hurt market position if it takes too long to get the full potential out of the platform. I think this is one reason why we're seeing such strong interest in CryEngine3—you can concentrate on making games while still driving the consoles to the max.

How much better equipped is CryEngine 3 for tough engine solutions on consoles, like a multiplatform MMO title?
I think two of the key points to make great games are a good workflow for content and low turn around times, especially for MMORPGs—where you need to build vast worlds covered in a lot of details. Every restart of the game to see the changes you made in an editor is a loss of time and breaks the flow of design and creativity, but for a lot of developers that was the way it had to be on console. So we had to give you all possibilities for CryEngine 3 on consoles that we already offered on PC in the previous version.

You want to plant another tree to see how great passing light-beams might look like in some situation? You need to raise the terrain and paint a rock texture on it to hide an item? You want to change light and shadow settings, to add some rim lighting to a shader, or change the NPC behavior to follow the player till he returns what he has stolen? You can do all this, on all platforms, with no reloading, no pre-computation for visibility culling or lightmaps, and immediately jump into the game to test it. And of course all changes you applied to the level are automatically streamed.

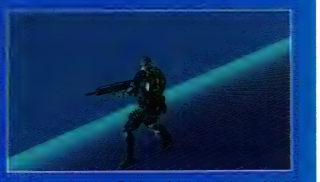


Have you improved the engine's capacity to handle extremely dense player populations, like MMO castle sieges or large social areas? A PC with lots of RAM usually helps matters here, but it's tricky on console.
Sure, and not only with online games in mind, but in general. Beyond the streaming, we achieved *very* good compression ratios in some areas to lower the memory usage. For example, when we started to design the animation system for CryEngine 3, streaming was assumed to be urgently needed. But the animation programmers did such a great job in compressing and real-time decompression of data that we could fit all the animations for our GDC demo in memory without having to stream it.
And CryEngine 3 is certainly not a closed project for us; we're still improving and adapting it to the needs of our own and our licenses' games. Besides that, we don't just license a code base; you get extensive help from our dedicated support department to help you find the best way to add unique functionality needed in your engine version.

How about other genres, like if a CryEngine 3 developer wants to create a pure racing or flying title? Is CE3 flexible enough to support advanced ground, sea and air vehicles in a dedicated title, so a developer can dive right into game design?
It's definitively flexible enough! CryEngine 3 isn't an uber engine offering absolutely *everything*, but it's very close! [Laughs]. You will always have to tweak or extend something to fit your needs, as games come alive through unique features, but unlike other engines that limit you to a closed environment, CryEngine was *always* made to support large open world designs. So you can very easily load some Crysis level into the Sandbox editor, use our road tool to place a race track, and the ground will be automatically smoothed to fit the track. Add one of the Crysis cars and you're done with a simple prototype.
This applies to flying titles too: one of the first demonstrations of Crysis was showcasing a combat helicopter, not only simulating accurate and controllable flight physics, but also AI that tries to avoid rockets and surprise you with attacks.

UNDER THE HOOD

Crytek's proprietary Polybump normal mapping returns in CE3, now offering lower-poly models nearly indistinguishable from 10-million poly originals. Other highlights abound: a stunning animation system with shape deformation and parametric skeletal blending (so characters look natural standing on uneven surfaces); remarkable natural world effects with powerful procedural destruction that lets you break wood, steal, glass, cloth, concrete and world vegetation—every broken shard interactive or usable; industry-leading physics that react to explosions, gravity, wind currents and more, gorgeous ocean effects with beautiful underwater lighting, and CG film-grade day-to-night cycles capable of remarkable atmospheric effects through misty mornings, scorching noon suns and stark moonlit evenings.



Crysis Wars has some sweet synchronized online physics effects that all players could see and be affected by. What if a CE3 developer wants to create a multiplayer title that focuses *entirely* on physics manipulation and destruction—how has CE3 improved over its predecessors in this regard?
The goal is basically to ensure that *anything* we have in single player also works in multiplayer, so any new physics we do always has multiplayer in mind. We continue to work on that network code, because with Crysis Wars we have a dedicated product that we use in daily sessions to constantly improve our code stability and performance. I think it offers pretty much everything possible with today's broadband connections, but that low level network code is just one part of a good online experience.
We further optimized the physics to manage more visibility queries, on SPUs if possible, and our culling code determines faster and more accurately what really needs to be synchronized. Overall, both technologies contribute to prepare the CryEngine 3 very well for such a game, but so far there's no game like this, so I can't make any final claims about how well it would work out! But I'm sure our network programmers, like all the Crytek guys, would love such a challenge.

I know you can't say anything specific yet, but I can't wait for E3... Thanks!
Cheers.

www.playmagazine.com

Talking Tak and the Guardians Of Gross With Blitz Games Entertainment's John Nash

words Dave Halverson

Last October THQ released the latest game in the Tak series, Tak and the Guardians of Gross for Wii and PS2, with all the fanfare of a flea circus in a wind tunnel. It's a great little game though, that also happens to house the best Wii technology we've seen. It was time to reach out and touch someone, UK style...

The lumbering giants are the levels; inside and out.

We very rarely see any type of normal mapping on the Wii. Some of the bigger games might have some baked in, but there are places in Tak GoG where it looks like the real thing. Has Blitz games created its own proprietary Wii tech?

John Nash: In the early days of the TAK project we were actually doing environment tests for the PS3 and Xbox 360. Principally, we were working on a chunk of jungle environment with all of the hardware shaded normal-mapped-goodness we have come to expect from these high-end consoles. By the time the game deal was signed, the platform scope had been reduced to PS2 and Wii.

During our pre-production phase, the Blitz Games Studios technology team was integrating Wii TEV unit graphics support into our BlitzTech cross platform game engine. The graphical capabilities of the Wii are in many ways similar to those of its current generation peers; however the process of achieving them is different. With a little patience and ingenuity the results can be impressive. Dan Calvert, one of my senior artists, relentlessly experimented with the graphics pipeline and eventually created the specular based pseudo-bump-mapping you see in the game. We chose this method of bump-mapping because it actually works on the PS2 – now that's a feature we were very happy with. We would have been able to have used the bump effect all over the game; however the twin perils of time and budgetary restrictions precluded us from doing so.

Within the same environments you're also achieving remarkable water and slime effects, animated textures, and a level of fine detail you just don't get on the Wii such as fine rubble and dust coming from Tak's hands as he climbs and shimmies along ledges. Isn't this all very expensive?

The Wii is capable of generating really good map driven reflection and refraction effects. I can't tell you how excited the team was when the first refracted water test booted up on the Wii—right there we knew we were going to do good things with this machine. By carefully adjusting the levels of reflectivity, transparency and source texture maps, the basic water effect was modified into the various strange liquids seen throughout the game. The rubble and dust effects are traditional code triggered particle systems. Any other game developer can achieve these with relative ease. On this project the team developed a really honed attention to detail and went above and beyond to make the game look as good as possible given the constraints we were working within.

See more Tak tech screens at www.playmagazine.com

Let's talk about the giant leviathans. I'd ask if they were inspired by Colossi (were they?) but they're more like gigantic lumbering mini-worlds. The play mechanics within their massive carcasses were fantastic, but emerging to navigate upwards was an extraordinary sight and I really liked all the little devices you incorporated to reach the summit/head. How did you come up with the design?

Ah, the giants! I think it would be remiss of me not to say that we were of course 'influenced' by Colossi—I guess a comparison will be drawn for every future game featuring giant scalable creatures. The original idea came from the creative teams of THQ and Nickelodeon which gave us a great launch point to conceive and develop ideas.

Our initial approaches varied, including a giant yellow rubber duck of all things. We went through a phase of basing them on the earthly elements before we settled on the more comedic Grosstrocities. Creating the illusion of being situated on the back of the giants was the single greatest technological challenge for the team. We solved it using some clever tech and a big helping of artistic smoke and mirrors. From a technical standpoint the screen effect was achieved in three stages. Firstly, the background scenery is a very low polygon repeating 'rolling road' animated model which was texture mapped to look like distant environment. The second stage was to blur this simple model on the fly to create depth of field and mask its simplicity before the last stage of drawing the foreground model of the giant and TAK over the top.

So far so good, but what about getting it all to animate? The trick we use here is to actually animate the background, not the giant model. We did this because making jumps on large moving scenery is pretty much impossible as well as being computationally very expensive. To achieve this, one of the animators animated an off screen cube to simulate the movement of the giant. The animation data from this cube was then applied to the background elements. The result is that the play area remains still, allowing the player to traverse the environment while the realistic movement of the background created the illusion of being on the back of a lumbering giant. To complete the effect, the dynamic sunlight was animated by the invisible cube to move all of the shadows and a dynamic wind system moved cloth, TAK's feather and particles in concert with the scenery movement. All in all a very comprehensive suite of effects were combined to create the illusion.

In terms of reaching the summit, the mechanics were created with a few main things in mind. They had to combine intuitively with the player control, move the player vertically and fit in with the look of the surroundings. Once you have those rules, it's a relatively straightforward process to dream up new play mechanics as the level designs are progressed. All of these were in addition to the parkour movement system.

They say the candle that burns brighter burns half as long. Is that why there's only four Grosstrocities? When you're packing in this level of detail along with mini-games, sliding/chase segments, story, and magic for each level, is the sacrifice length? That said, it's a game I'll replay often.

When we set out to make this game we faced a decision—do we shoot for a long duration game with less gameplay features or do we go with a shorter experience and fill it to bursting with great art and heaps of varied mechanics? We chose the latter, we felt it was what we wanted to do and also it's a core ideology of the TAK video game brand. The team did a great job given that extremely tight timeline—it's times like these I relish working in a studio with a very mature outsourcing heritage.

So, if you can do this with Tak, I can only imagine what you could do with a big budget platforming epic. Millions of Nintendo devotees who grew up on Rare games are chomping at the bit for the next big Banjo style adventure. Any such plans?

I hear what you're saying about Nintendo devotees, I love platformers—coincidently, I worked on the Donkey Kong Country series and was the principle artist on Banjo Kazooie at Rare. Believe me, if I ever get the chance I'd be more than happy to create the characters and worlds to revive the glory days of platforming games. Platforming is the game genre of kings!

Okay, you're now officially my pal. Whatever you do next, let us in on it so we can get the word out. THQ hid Tak like it was a Family Dog sequel.

Of course we will—we make games, we play them and we definitely like talking about them! Thanks for the opportunity to share what we have done with TAK, I look forward to sharing more with you and your illustrious readers in the future.

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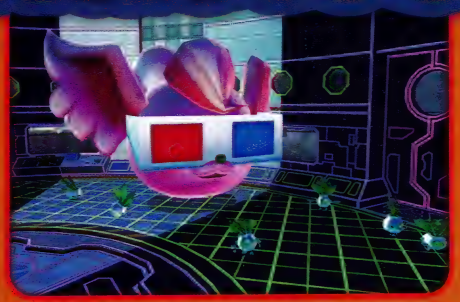

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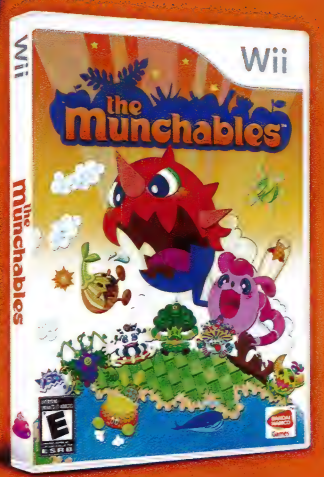

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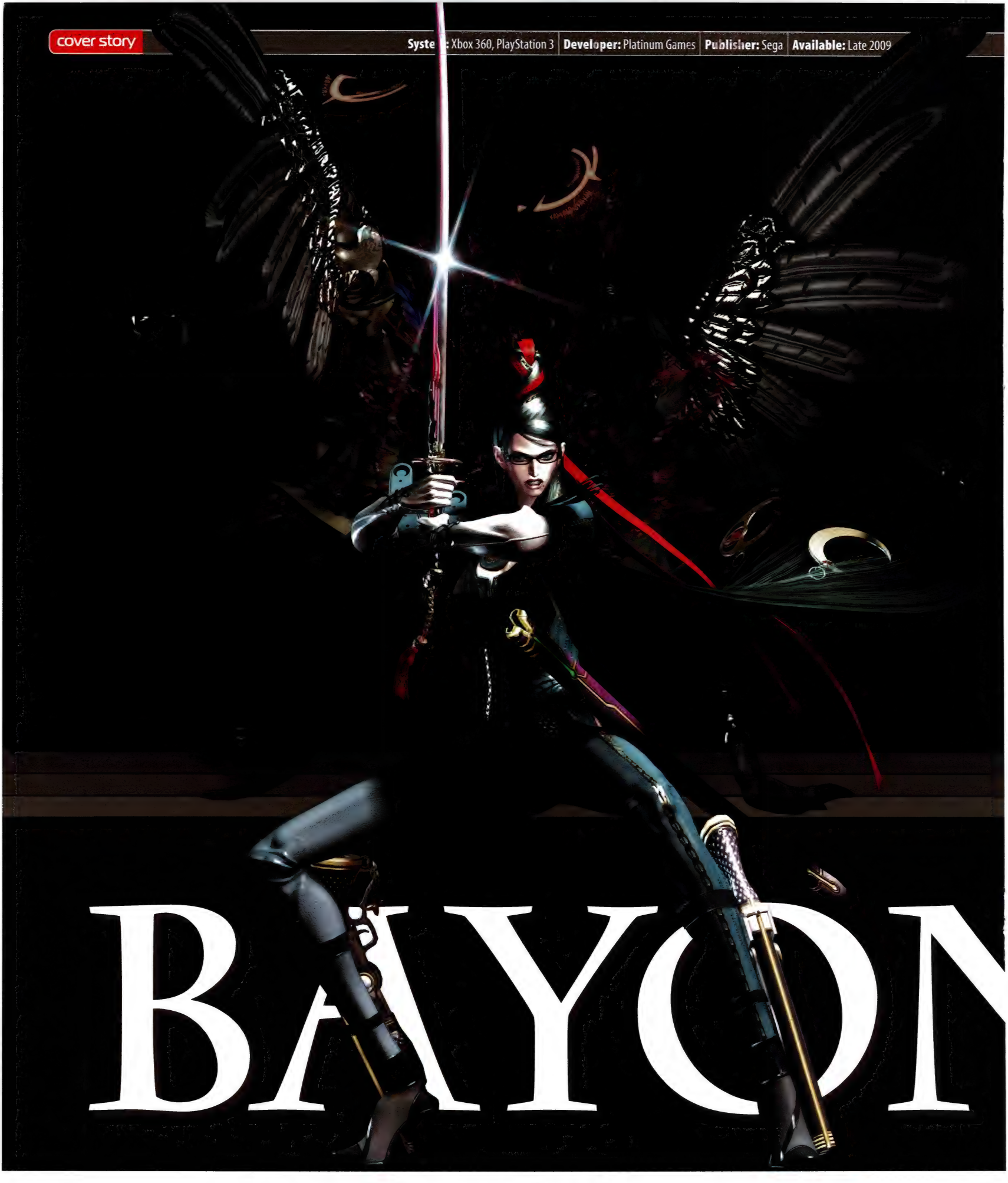


BAYON

"I

NETTA

Angels Will Cry

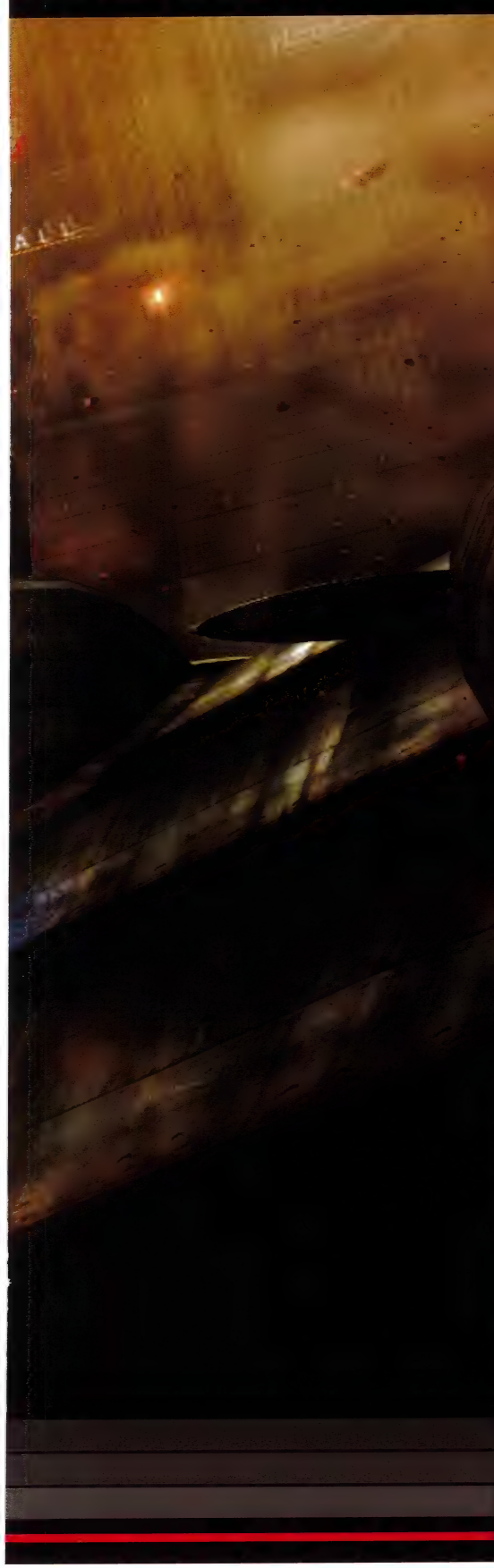
words Casey Loe

don't hate sequels," insists Hideki Kamiya, despite his frequent complaints about the game industry's sequel-saturated marketplace. "If I could do them, I would... I'd like to make sequel money!" he adds with a laugh. But for whatever reason, Kamiya has had to watch as others took charge of his creations, churning out the dreadful Devil May Cry 2 and banging out a quick sequel to his next game, Viewtiful Joe, while he toiled away on wholly original titles. It was Devil May Cry 2 that stung the most, since Kamiya's team (many of which are working with him still) had been abuzz with ideas for Devil May Cry 2 as they were completing the original game. "As you can imagine, it was pretty frustrating," Kamiya reflects. "It wasn't until now that we've finally had an outlet for all of the expertise that we'd built up while working on DMC1." Forget the Devil May Cry sequels that you did get—Bayonetta is the lost follow-up that Dante's creators never got to make.

POSTURE, POISE, AND PERSECUTION

Of course, Bayonetta differs from Devil May Cry in many key ways, beginning with its significantly less effeminate protagonist [rim shot]. The game's titular witch is a fascinating character, and one that will surely inspire several horrible term papers at the Gender Studies departments of liberal-arts universities. She wears a skintight suit composed mostly of her own hair, and the suit disintegrates—leaving behind only the gold-ribbon seams and a few carefully positioned patches of hair—whenever she uses the capping move of her combos to pound foes with giant hair fists and hair boots. Hearing such things may lead one to assume that Bayonetta is just another Lara Croft-style tart, but her sexuality comes off as far more provocative than pandering. Haughty, sadistic, and cold, Bayonetta stands with legs crossed in a perfect charm-school pose and sashays like a runway model as she coolly guns down fallen enemies. Charging up a magic meter below her health bar allows her to finish off foes with "torture attacks," which involve kicking her target into an iron maiden or, more savage yet, knocking him into a guillotine and planting a high-heeled boot in his back as the blade severs his head. Bayonetta really does seem to enjoy hurting her prey; that she comes off as charmingly sadistic instead of merely cruel has a lot to do with those grad-student spectacles and her oh-so sexy British accent (especially when she starts tossing F-bombs around).

"IT WASN'T UNTIL NOW THAT WE'VE FINALLY HAD AN OUTLET FOR ALL OF THE EXPERTISE THAT WE'D BUILT UP WHILE WORKING ON DMC1." -HIDEKI KAMIYA



There's a tantalizing possibility that Bayonetta may prove a shade darker than Japan's usual pure-hearted heroes, as the foes she fights appear to be angelic in nature. It isn't clear why Bayonetta has run afoul of the divine host; the game begins with her awakening in a coffin at the bottom of a lake, with no clue as to who she is or how she got there. (Oh, amnesia. What would the video game industry do without you?) Bayonetta also seems to be on the outs with her own coven of witches, all of whom apparently share Bayonetta's obsession with skin-tight clothing and heel-mounted firearms. I guess broomsticks and floppy black hats just aren't cutting it anymore.

HER FEET AT YOUR FINGERTIPS

Kamiya's gift for creating intuitive control schemes is on full display in Bayonetta, even though our heroine's move set is full of wildly unconventional attacks. Bayonetta wields weapons with both her hands and her feet, so in most cases she'll be holding a melee weapon like a katana or whip, with a pair of guns strapped to the heels of her boots. As in Devil May Cry, the game offers a stunning array of combos that link physical attacks with quick blasts from your guns, but quite unlike DMC, the guns are effective weapons in their own right, and do not merely exist to keep your combos going between strikes. One of the game's most potent moves can be triggered by spinning the analog stick in a circle and tapping a button to which a gun has been equipped; if it's on Bayonetta's feet, she'll do a handstand while the game briefly slows down and the camera pulls in, allowing you to aim her feet freely as you blast away at as many foes as you can. Finally, Bayonetta has the ability to evade attacks with a tap of the right trigger. The trick here is to wait until the last possible moment; when you flip away in the nick of time, Bayonetta enters Witch Time, in which the foes on the battlefield are slowed considerably while she retains the ability to move and attack freely.

On the equip screen, you can select two different pairs of foot and hand armaments, and switch between them at any time with a tap of a shoulder button. Switching weapons mid-combo is an advanced technique that most players won't get much out of on their first trip through the game, but Kamiya hints that it's a powerful tactic in high-level play. We had enough trouble remembering the massive list of combos associated with each weapon, although the game has a clever way of helping you keep track of them; during load screens, a list of combos pops up, and you're able to practice to your heart's content. (The game doesn't take all that long to load, but you can remain on this screen by tapping the back button.) A counter keeps track of how many times you've executed each combo within the game, so you can tell at a glance what moves you have yet to add to your repertoire. The amount of combos in the game may seem daunting, but there are common elements that make them easier to grasp within only a few

Deadly with a whip.

"THE GAME HAS, IN KAMIYA'S WORDS, 'A RIDICULOUS AMOUNT OF WEAPONS.'"

minutes of gameplay. For example, if you hold down an attack button in the middle of a combo, you'll cancel out of the sequence with a flurry of attacks from your chosen limb. If you complete a combo and wait half a beat before tapping a button, you'll execute the deadly hair-fist or hair-boot strike, respectively.

In addition to the weapons in your equip screen, which become available as Bayonetta proceeds through her quest and can be upgraded based on an in-game currency system, Bayonetta can pick up any weapon dropped by her foes. In our brief time with the game, we managed to scrounge up axes, polearms, morning stars, and even a blunderbuss-style gun. Kamiya refers to these as "Final Fight weapons," since they don't have the lengthy move lists of Bayonetta's favored gear. Instead they merely have one or two basic attacks, which slowly drain the weapons' stamina bars until they empty and the weapon disappears. Alternatively, Bayonetta can burn the entire bar in one flashy special attack, such as planting a polearm in the earth and spinning around it like a stripper on a pole to damage everyone nearby. The game has, in Kamiya's words, "a ridiculous amount of weapons."

All of this comes from only the first ten or so minutes of the game; Kamiya pulled up some saved files to give us a peak at some later levels, and Bayonetta's repertoire of moves clearly continues to evolve. In one stage she was able to summon her hair fists to pick up cars and hurl them at foes. In another, she was able to reverse gravity by running along the walls and ceilings, flipping the camera to make whatever plane she chose the ground. In yet another, she transformed into a panther (a *hair* panther, one would assume) and dashed around the battlefield to leap quickly from one target to another.

CHAPTER AND VERSE ON CHAPTERS, VERSES

The ability to craft a solid and enjoyable combat system is a rare art, but the ability to stretch it out for ten or twenty hours without becoming mired in repetition is an even rarer one. Kamiya shakes his head when we ask about the sort of light puzzle-solving and lengthy traversal scenes that are used to space out the battles in the Devil May Cry and Ninja Gaiden series; Bayonetta aims to be pretty much pure action. Nevertheless,

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Kamiya is predicting a total playtime of roughly 12 hours, and plenty of incentive to keep playing. "You'll probably be shocked at how much content is in there," he says.

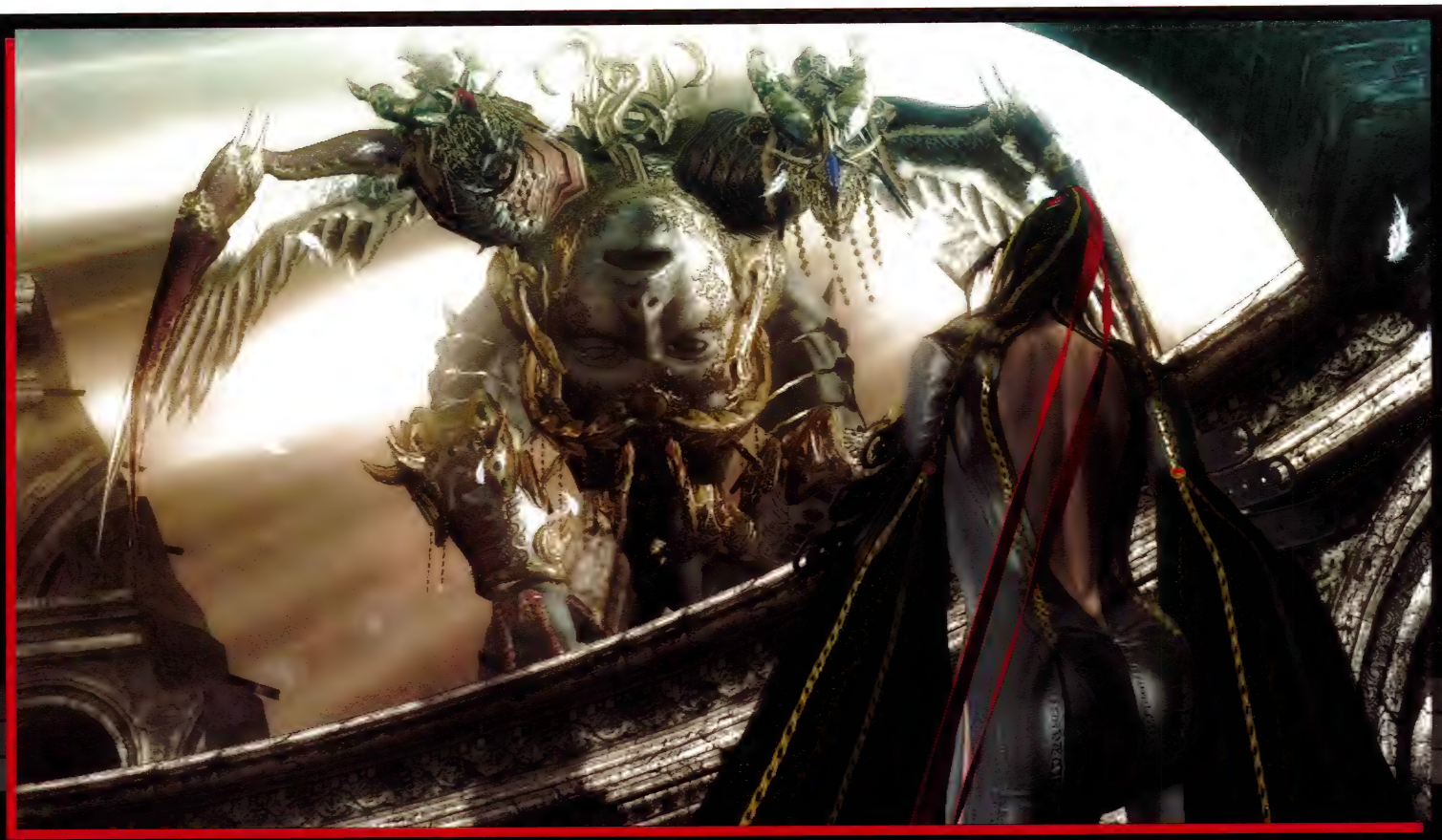
Each chapter of Bayonetta is broken up into ten "verses," each roughly two minutes in length. Some verses have a series of enemy encounters, while others consist of a single boss fight or a mad dash through a crumbling area. At the end of each verse you'll be scored based on the damage you've taken and the skill of your combos, among other things, and receive a medal for your efforts. At the end of each chapter, your medals will be tallied, and you'll receive a statue based on the score. (I always got the same one, depicting a fat British man in a bowler slipping and falling, which I've decided to assume is the very best one possible.)

Some verses roll directly into each other, linked by event scenes that sometimes contain QTE button-mashing sequences. (If I have one complaint about Bayonetta, the QTE's would be it. They appear not only in event scenes, but also during certain boss attacks and in the "Climax Moves" that end each boss fight. It's a lame mechanic as is, and even more tiresome

"DON'T THINK OF IT AS 'THERE'S NO DLC FOR THIS GAME,' BUT MORE LIKE 'ALL THE DLC IS ALREADY IN THE BOX.'"

and unnecessary in a game that's already built around frantic button tapping.) Others verses give you a brief window to explore, but those who prefer not to dawdle will find that they're never more than a few seconds away from the next burst of action. Stopping to smell the roses is well worth it, however, as the game's environments are highly destructible, and smashed statues and pots often contain money and items that refill health or magic. (These are assigned to control-pad directions so they can be used easily in the middle of combat.) We even discovered a hidden verse by backtracking a short distance to an area we'd already passed through, the first of a countless number of secrets that Kamiya's team has built into every stage of the game.

Kamiya isn't relying on the usual unlockable modes and weapons to provide replay value, even though there are plenty of post-ending bonuses in the game. "Game designers who say 'look at all our bonus stuff, you can play it over and over...' they're taking the easy way out," Kamiya asserts. "I think it's much more important to make the main campaign as fun as possible." To achieve that, he's focusing on creating a density of gameplay that will offer more content than a player can possibly experience in a single playthrough, packing the game with secrets, weapons, and high-level abilities. Kamiya claims his team is putting so much effort into creating a lengthy and satisfying experience that there's absolutely no need to extend it with downloadable content. "Don't think of it as 'there's no DLC for this game,' but more like 'all the DLC is already in the box.'" Kamiya suggests. "This time it's on me. But," he adds with a laugh, "next time I'll probably want your money."



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"'I ALWAYS THINK THAT THEY'LL SELL WELL!' KAMIYA SAYS. 'AND THEY NEVER DO.'"

MURDERING ANGELS TO THE J-POP BEAT

Bayonetta seems to take place in the same hazy pseudo-European city that for some reason is the setting of *every* Japanese-made character-action game. (It's called Vigrid in this one, but it may as well be Ninja Gaiden's Vigoor Empire.) The art direction and monster design holds the same obsession with statuary and angels as the recent Devil May Cry games, and the combination of the eerily similar settings and monster designs can be a little disconcerting. However, Bayonetta's soundtrack of upbeat jazz and J-pop certainly won't remind anyone of Devil May Cry, which is pretty ironic considering the sound team actually includes Devil May Cry composer Masami Ueda. "Because our protagonist is a woman, instead of the usual loud, pounding action-game soundtrack, we thought we'd try something a little more elegant and ladylike," explains Kamiya. The composers clearly delight in subverting expectations, building up layers of rising tension in the early phases of a major boss fight only to kick into a sugary vocal ballad just when you'd expect a grinding-guitar climax.

While the game's art direction may not pack the same subversive impact, Bayonetta does look good, with action locked in at 60 fps during combat and top-notch effects and character animation. There are a few unique visual twists that give the game a touch more atmosphere than its predecessors; Bayonetta does her battling in a slightly different dimension than the one normal folks are accustomed to, and while no one can see her, she can see the Predator-cloak-like outlines of passersby, who turn and flee as objects on the battlefield are destroyed in the fray. There's also an impressive amount of terrain deformation during boss fights, kicking off with a giant beast that snaps off the bridge on which you're standing, shakes it around, and hurls it across the battlefield. Walls and floors are constantly crumbling, and other encounters take place entirely on the arms and backs of massive creatures, which break into disconnected pieces as the battles wear on. The climactic, ever-evolving boss encounters seem to be a clear highlight of the game.

PLATINUM GAMES SHAREHOLDERS MAY CRY

It's hard to imagine Bayonetta failing to register with audiences. Like the dream sequel that Kamiya never got to make, Bayonetta seems to be getting everything right that Devil May Cry did, and most things even better. That sounds like a recipe for a smashing success to us, but Kamiya has been burned a few times too many to stay optimistic. "I always think that they'll sell well!" Kamiya says. "And they never do. I'm just as nervous about Bayonetta as I was about Okami." Laughing, Kamiya turns towards the audio recorder to address Play's readers. "This time, seriously folks, I'm begging you. Please buy it!"

Interview with Hideki Kamiya, Director, and Yusuke Hashimoto, Producer, Bayonetta

Interview by Casey Loe and Nick Des Barres / Transcribed by Dai Kohama / Translated by Nick Des Barres

play: What was your motivation for designing a character action game with a female lead?
It's funny, I was just writing about this on the Bayonetta blog. All the games I've made so far have had male leads, so... when it was time to come up with a protagonist for this game, a female character was the first thing I thought of. I'm not much of an abstract thinker, so I can't be entirely certain about this, but (laughs)... I'd already done so much with male characters, I think it was just a matter of needing to find something new. I knew I wanted to make an action game, and an action game has to be flashy. You want the player to be able to do spectacular attacks, you want the enemies to do unrealistic things you'd never expect... that's the kind of fantasy world I wanted to create. A witch was what seemed right for a female character in this dark fantasy world.

Is Bayonetta primarily a story about women? The main antagonists seem to be witches, too.
There are male characters too (laughs). The trailers have shown three of them, I think. Our second trailer featured a very important character named Luca, and the new one has two other characters we haven't revealed the names of yet.

What can you tell us about Luca?
Hmm... Well, he's quite a major character. In terms of the scenario, he's there until the very end. He has a long history with Bayonetta that comes out during the story.

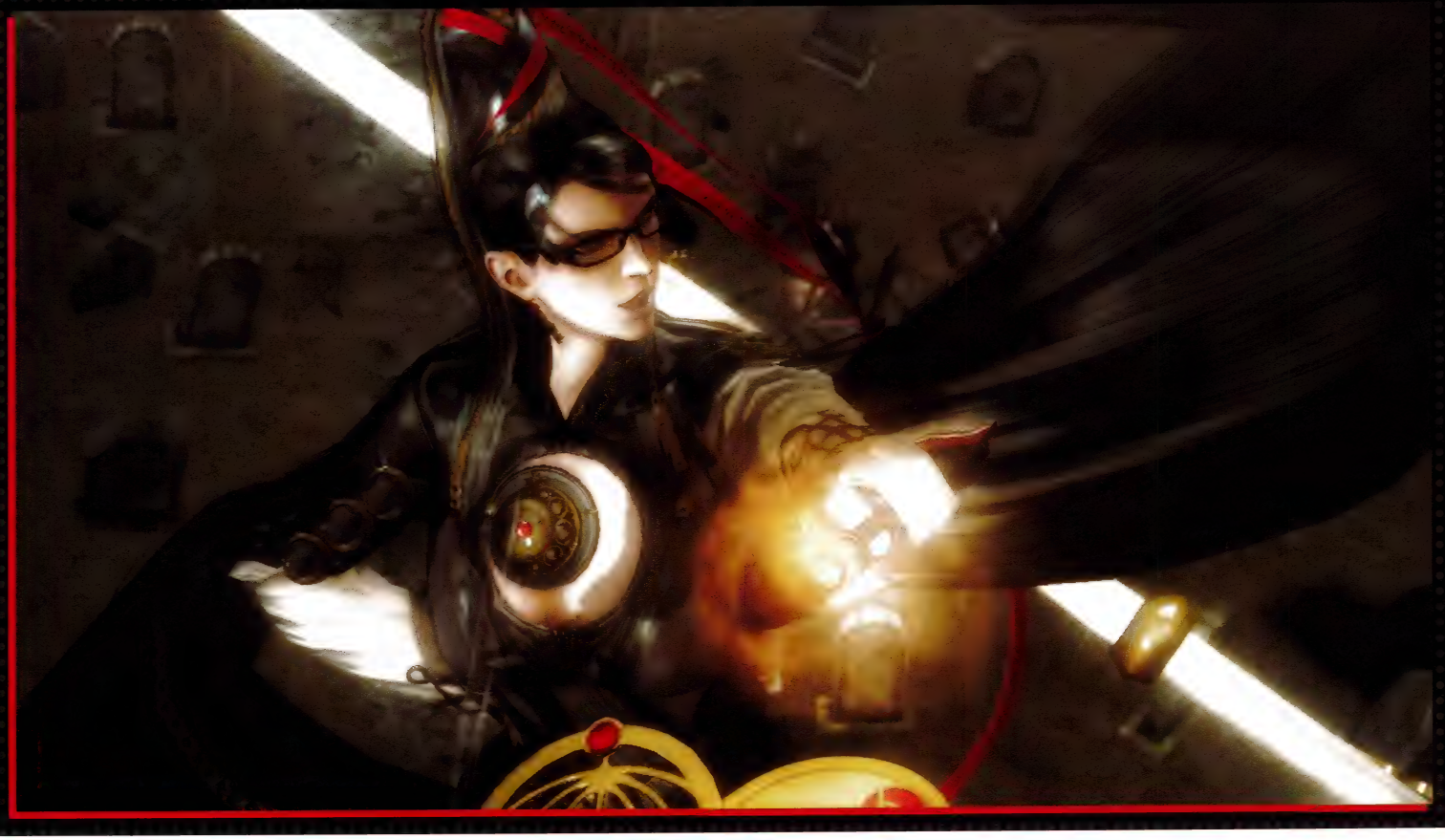
What's their relationship like?
He's spent a long time trying to track her down. He needs to find her to learn the truth about a certain event. They're not really "friends," per se ... nothing like Dante and Trish, for example.

Getting back to Bayonetta herself, the design is truly impressive. She flouts every Japanese "moe" archetype for a sexy female character... was there a conscious decision to do something original with her design?
Is "moe" popular in America, too? (laughs). "Moe," hmm... No, there was no specific decision to do something contrary to the mainstream. We were just thinking about what we could offer that the fans might enjoy, and we arrived at this "onee ('elder sister')" type of character. There's nothing fresh about coming up with the same type of character as everyone else, right? I personally think this kind of character is very attractive—glasses-wearing, sexy, intelligent, aggressive—and more importantly, she's original. I did have to fight for her—I trusted in my instincts that other people would find her interesting. She does have a lot of individuality ... you're either going to love her or hate her. In the end, I think the people that do love her will really love her (laughs).

"I PERSONALLY THINK THIS KIND OF CHARACTER IS VERY ATTRACTIVE—GLASSES-WEARING, SEXY, INTELLIGENT, AGGRESSIVE—AND MORE IMPORTANTLY, SHE'S ORIGINAL."

We've heard you were very insistent about the glasses.
It's not as if glasses were a character design requirement I set down, but as I was discussing Bayonetta with our character designer, Mari Shimazaki ... I knew I wanted a modern silhouette, something like a combat suit, but the character had to be identifiable as a witch. I kept telling Miss Shimazaki, "I need an onee character—an adult, not a girl." The glasses look is very specific, so I knew there would be resistance ... one day I asked Shimazaki to tack the glasses on to her most recent design, to test the waters with our staff. If there was a lot of disagreement I planned to pass it off as a joke, but they liked it (laughs). Everyone became comfortable with the glasses, and I realized it could work. After a while, it became impossible to imagine her without them ... like Nobita from Doraemon, have you ever seen him without glasses? (laughs)

How do you approach designing a game around such a strong character—or did the game design come first, in this case?
When you're working on a game, you always find yourself coming up with new gameplay ideas mid-development. For this project, we made the protagonist a witch to facilitate incorporating those new ideas. You'll be playing and think, "I wish I could do this! It would be so cool if you could do such-and-such move!," but that usually leads to, "no human being could pull that off!" But because Bayonetta is a witch ... we can have her do anything we



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"DESIGNERS WHO SAY 'LOOK AT ALL OUR BONUS STUFF, YOU CAN PLAY IT OVER AND OVER!'... THAT'S THE EASY WAY OUT. I THINK IT'S MUCH MORE IMPORTANT TO MAKE THE MAIN CAMPAIGN AS FUN AS POSSIBLE."

want (laughs). I think the real strength of this project was deciding that the protagonist would be a witch from the very beginning.

The gameplay evolved and changed during development?
Yes... for example, the idea of Bayonetta doing the demon-summoning punches and kicks wasn't there at the beginning of development. The initial concept was simply that she had different weapons attached to her hands and feet, and they could be changed around at will. We were hearing requests for really extreme visuals, and just as we began to research this concept of summoning demons for individual attacks, Bayonetta's design was starting to come together. Like I said, I wanted her to be "witchy," but I didn't think that should just mean black clothes. She's a beautiful woman, so I imagined she'd be proud of her long hair. I came up with the idea of using Bayonetta's hair to accentuate her motion, like the long flapping coat in Dante's case. But we were having trouble displaying long hair ... it would cover Bayonetta's body on screen, making it hard to discern what she was doing. Then we tried wrapping her in long hair, with strands trailing off her arms likes sleeves. Only after seeing that design did we come up with the concept of magically weaving things out of her hair, whether it was clothes or a giant demon fist. All these ideas informed each other, and we wound up with the final gameplay design.

How long would you say game will take to play through?
More than ten hours ... about twelve, maybe? It's not as if you beat it and it ends, though; you'll be able to keep playing multiple times.

Do you mean higher difficulty levels, or unlockables...?
Not just those things ... I really don't like to talk about unlockables from the get-go. Designers who say "look at all our bonus stuff, you can play it over and over!"... that's the easy way out. I think it's much more important to make the main campaign as fun as possible. These types of action games aren't like RPGs or something, they're compact, and I think it's really important to have game density that lends itself to replaying short chunks over and over. I've really kept that in mind while making this game. There are little things in Bayonetta, like the "secrets" or "hidden levels" from old-school games—you might find something interesting if you head off in a different direction, or go back to look at something from a cutscene. We've added hidden secrets like that throughout the entire game, so I think it would be a shame if people only played through once. On a second play-through, you'll be starting a new save with the heightened skills and techniques you learned on your first trip through, so it'll be like a completely different game. There are an incredible amount of weapons to use, for instance ... really, way too many (laughs). Setting up different weapon sets on Bayonetta's limbs and switching between them gets really deep. With all of that said, however, Bayonetta does have traditional post-game unlockables—don't worry.

Can you actually switch equipment mid-combo, like Devil May Cry 4's real time style switching?
You certainly can. I haven't gotten deep into it myself, personally—I'm looking forward to seeing what fans do with it. I can't wait to see what kind of crazy combo videos people come up with.

Are you or Sega thinking about any DLC?
There won't be any DLC. One reason is because we want everyone who buys this game, whether they're online or not, to play the same thing, but we also believe those sort of bonuses should be in the game from the beginning. It won't be a case of us taking extra money from you for bonus content ... it's already there on the disc.

Would you say you have a strong anti-DLC stance?
Hmm... no, I'd actually like to be making DLC money (laughs). But I want you to really get your money's worth. My thinking with DLC is ... if it truly expands the breadth of a game, it's worth doing. In the case of Bayonetta, however, we've worked extremely hard to give the fans their money's worth right on the disc. Don't think of it as 'there's no DLC for this game,' but more like 'all the DLC is already in the box.' You'll probably be shocked at how much content is in there. This time it's on me, but next time I'll probably want your money (laughs).

Do you hope there will be a next time for Bayonetta?
I think people have this misconception about me in Japan, too... I don't hate sequels. If I could do them, I would... I'd like to make sequel money! (laughs) I mean, come on, original titles one after the other are hard to do. Every time, it's like, "You're still hungry, right? Look! There's still some curry powder left! We can make another bowl!"—but if you want another bowl of curry, you have to make sure you get your dishes done (laughs). No, I don't avoid making sequels on purpose. I want to do them, but not because a sequel would necessarily be easier to make than something totally original. Fans would have certain expectations for a sequel that would have to be met, whether it would be related to the storyline, new moves, whatever. Every time I make a game I want to be able to meet those expectations in a sequel, but I haven't been able to. It's something I consider very unfortunate.

What inspired you to do another character action game? It's been a long time since Devil May Cry.
Kamiya: My inspiration is sitting right next to me (laughs).

Hashimoto: Mr. Kamiya was working on a number of other designs, but I was hoping to make a pure action game. I just asked him ... "hey, you want to do an action game?"

Kamiya: We were just talking in the company office. When we started Platinum, I thought we needed to come out of the gate with something really new ... something a little eccentric, a curveball game. I prepared design docs for a few ideas, put them up on the company network, and asked everyone to look at them. That's when Mr. Hashimoto told me, "I want to see another Kamiya action game," and it was like someone flipped a switch (laughs). I realized I hadn't put up any orthodox game ideas at all. Our company is full of people who know action games—Devil May Cry and Viewtiful Joe among them—and I realized that with this staff, we had to do another action game. When I posted the initial design doc for Bayonetta... all the other ideas got no reaction, but everyone came over to tell me "this one works!" (laughs) It was like, "I get it, the staff want to do an action game too."

Hashimoto: Personally, I think if you're going to throw a curveball, throw it with a little experience behind you. My feelings were very simple ... I just wanted to work on a pure action game with Mr. Kamiya. How many years ago was Devil May Cry? Seven? Eight? That's a long time ago—what sort of action game could we make now? It was like a challenge we gave to ourselves, and I think that

challenge resonated with all our staff.

Kamiya: Mr. Hashimoto and I made Devil May Cry together, you know. We'd just begun thinking about what DMC2 would be like when we were told we weren't doing it. It was very, "What! We're not doing DMC2? Some other team is?!" As you can imagine, it was pretty frustrating. It wasn't until now that we've finally had an outlet for all of the expertise that we'd built up while working on DMC1. We've done a lot of other games in those eight years, too—Mr. Hashimoto did God Hand, I did my things—we really felt that Bayonetta would be the culmination of all that experience.

Would you call Bayonetta the Devil May Cry sequel you never got to make?
I would say no, but ... that's not really an overstatement. When we announced Bayonetta, I said action games hadn't evolved in seven years. That was a little harsh, but you have to understand that we set the DMC groundwork with pure brute force. We began from zero, experimenting endlessly to find the answer to the question: "What should a pure action game in 3D space be like?" Once we'd finally arrived at an answer that we were satisfied with, we wanted to polish it further, to try gameplay ideas we didn't get around to the first time. We never did get that chance, so in the sense of having an outlet for those ideas now, you could call Bayonetta the true evolution of the work we did eight years ago.

Have you had the ideas you used in Bayonetta for a long time? Did you find that those ideas significantly changed over the course of development?
They change, but ... the core of the ideas has stayed constant. In the very first design doc, we had the multiple weapons for hands and feet, the customization ... even the panther transformation you briefly saw in the demo. The Witch Time feature, too—although it wasn't named as such—had its genesis in those earliest ideas, as a way to simulate super high-speed action. It was merely about clothing those ideas in Bayonetta's skin, making it a Bayonetta punch instead of just an everyday punch, designing a world to match her, adding the monster summoning. So, those very first core ideas never really changed.

What about puzzle elements? It seemed like the panther transformation was to facilitate a puzzle.
No, it's all action. The panther is for rapid dashing attacks—if enemies are distant from each other, you can dispatch one, transform into the panther, dash over to the next, and continue your combo. In other words, it's purely an action gimmick.

A few technical questions. Is the Bayonetta engine original?
Yes, it's 100% in-house.

We've only seen the 360 version today... is PS3 development coming along well?
Uh... it's coming along well (laughs).

Okay. What about anti-aliasing across the two versions? The promotional screens and videos released so far don't seem to have any.
The final version will have anti-aliasing, but the theme of Bayonetta isn't really gorgeous graphics—not that we're neglecting the graphics!—but we're defending the 60fps barrier with our life (laughs). Of course, our designers are still very particular about visuals. I think they've done a good job. If we were only concerned about graphics, sure, it could look prettier, but at the sacrifice of frame rate and resolution. To me, sub-60fps action games are just not tenable. DMC was 60, Joe was 60... Okami was 30, but only because action wasn't completely central to that title, and I thought the stylized, Japonesque feeling of the graphics was more important. In Bayonetta's case, once we decided it was all action, we were never going to give up 60fps. Everything is to serve the frame rate.

Don't get me wrong, I think it looks remarkably good at 60fps (laughs).
It's really a battle between making intricate assets, then putting them in the game engine and seeing if we drop frames. We won't sacrifice 60fps for anything, but we'll make the visuals as good as they possibly can be while still maintaining the frame rate.

Will there be any difference between the two versions in content or gameplay?
No, none. It's just the Achievements, and the... what are they, on PlayStation?

Trophies?
Trophies. Those are slightly different. By the way, I think Achievements were really a brilliant idea, but think about it—they're called Achievements. We developers can't simply paste in "Achievement Unlocked" for defeating so-and-so enemy in so-and-so seconds. It was a great idea, but some people making games don't use it right. I wanted to actually reward the player through gameplay for their Achievements, so we've linked the Achievements and Trophies with the game engine in an interesting way.

Different from other games?
Well, the conditions for unlocking them might not be that unusual, but you don't just unlock them and that's it. There's a second layer to our Achievements, so I hope the fans look forward to that.

Let's talk about the music for a moment. Honestly, I was a little surprised by the jazz... I think I was expecting some DMC-style hard rock. Who's the composer?
Our music staff is the same as Okami. We had a main composer, and his apprentice ... that hierarchy is in reverse on Bayonetta. The master—Masami Ueda, he did DMC too—gave the task of main composer to his apprentice, Akari Kaida.

You've been working with Masami Ueda since Resident Evil 2.
That's right ... he helped on Resident Evil 1, 2, a little on Joe ... we've always been a team. This time, it's like the master's making his apprentice do the work ... like Qui-Gon is standing behind Obi-Wan waiting for him to perform (laughs). We hit upon our composition style after some discussion ... because our protagonist is a woman, instead of the usual loud, pounding action-game soundtrack, we thought we'd try something a little more elegant and ladylike, with a little jazzy vocal flavor. We wanted the sound to feel feminine.

Let me ask you a game philosophy question. How important is fan feedback to you? Does it inform or alter your work?
Well, to be honest, I don't analyze fan opinions in great detail. I just don't think a game made after extensive feedback analysis will be the game fans want. I guess I trust myself above anyone else ... I mean, I was brought up with games, I was a game kid, I'm a gamer. I make my games—I want to keep making my games—with the attitude, "You know why this is good, right? You're a gamer too!" I say this often—it's just the way I am—but I haven't consciously thought about making top-selling, hugely profitable games. I know I'll have to think about it from now on... it's my job, as a creator of products. I do want lots of people to play my games. In that respect, I think, my personal interests and the interests of the company match up. I really believe that you need to think about creating a game that's fun to play before considering whether or not it will sell ... eventually, a flower's going to bloom. I hope I always get to make games that way. Of course, I say this even though Joe and Okami were retail failures... This time, seriously folks, I'm begging you (laughs). Please buy Bayonetta!

I have a feeling Bayonetta's going to sell well.
Kamiya: I always think that they'll sell well! And they never do. I'm just as nervous about Bayonetta as I was about Okami.

Hashimoto: What if it doesn't sell?

Kamiya: I'm retiring (laughs).

Hashimoto: If you're going to say that, why not just go back home to Shinshu already? (laughs)

Kamiya: Maybe I will (laughs).

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System: PS3 | **Developer:** Naughty Dog | **Publisher:** SCEA | **Available:** Fall 2009

UNCHARTED 2: AMONG THIEVES

Teaching a Naughty Dog New Tricks

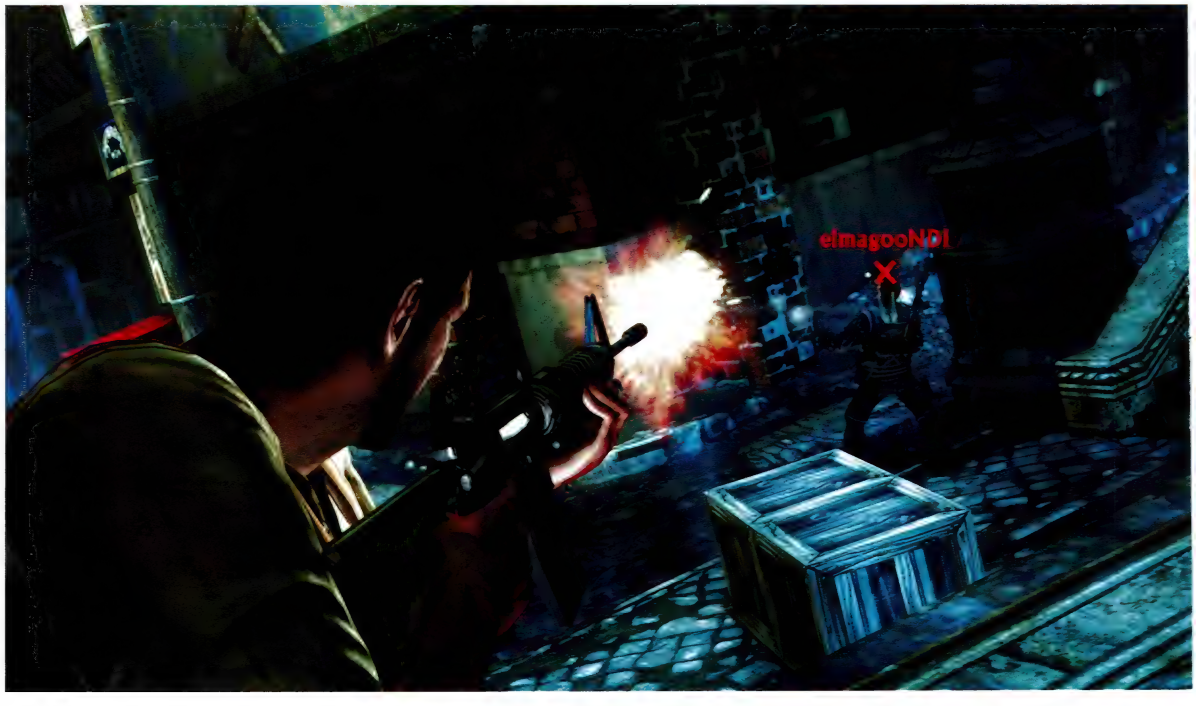
words Heather Anne Campbell

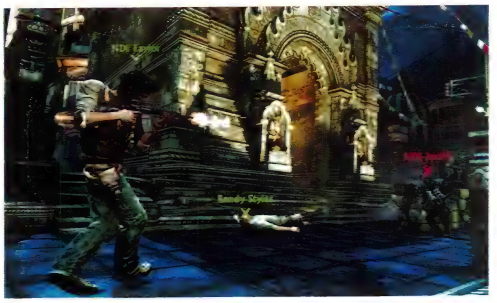
"I REMEMBER THE FUN OF THE FIREFIGHTS, THE SYNERGY BETWEEN MY INTENTIONS AND THE GRACE OF THEIR ON-SCREEN IMPLEMENTATION"

At Sony's recent gamer's day, I was lucky enough to spend a full, delicious hour playing both the co-op and deathmatch modes of the upcoming Uncharted 2: Among Thieves. Uncharted was one of my favorite games of 2007, not only because of the great script and crack voice acting, but also thanks to the mechanics of the title. The movement, the action, and the precision of the controls gave a snap to the whole package that was reminiscent of Gears of War. Uncharted was fun, and the puzzles were padded between just enough twitch gaming sequences.

Happily, I can report that Uncharted 2 is going to give us more of we've already experienced. The controls are not shucked away for some new, game-breaking Big Concept. There's going to be more PR spin on the title in the coming months, and maybe we'll hear about a gimmick that's supposed to rein us in, but guess what? We don't need it. We just need more of the charm of Uncharted, with more time to explore the lush environments that made the first game so smart.

We don't really even need plot. You know, when I think back on Drake's Fortune, I don't really remember what it was about, beyond the clever soul of the character relationships. I remember Sully and the blond girl ... uh ... whats-her-face. Ellen? Elena?





charming voice-over work will spill over into the co-op or versus modes, as Naughty Dog has specifically been working on balance before they set out to polish. I've got my fingers crossed. As much as I love the crunch of the game, I also adored its spirit. Chiseling the game down to its mechanics is demonstrative of Uncharted's punch, but I'm hoping we get a little more of its personality.

To make sure there's enough hype energy in this preview, (because we actually are excited about Uncharted 2), we'll conclude with the following paragraph of familiar Games Journalism tropes.

Let's just say that it was worth the wait. Getting our hot little hands on Drake's new adventure was an extraordinary experience. Minor gripes aside, this is the real system seller. Don't get me wrong; while it doesn't bring anything new to the genre, everything else pales in comparison. There's nothing wonky about the visuals in the deathmatch modes, and on the whole, versus is a welcome addition. Let's face it; it was only a matter of time before Co-Op was brought to the world of Drake. Now, Uncharted 2 is truly like Tomb Raider on steroids. Among Thieves? More like Among Goodness.

Doesn't matter.

Mostly, I remember the fun of the firefights, the synergy between my intentions and the grace of their on-screen implementation. So, for those of us who were head-over-heels for the game-play itself, like me, there's a nice surprise stuffed into Uncharted 2. Co-Op game-play, stripped away from the main plot to be self-contained treasure-runs. Deathmatch, for handsome battles between heroes and ski-masked villains. And Plunder, an Uncharted take on Capture-the-flag.

Co-Op featured Drake, Sully, and Chloe (the new female sidekick), a somewhat shared life-bar between the players, and a Gears of War, Left for Dead style recovery system (downed comrades could be brought back from the brink by living heroes). Each level apparently has different objectives—the Co-Op introduction Play received had moments of aggressive offense, forced segments where the team had to split up, and king-of-the-hill defensive sections. Points earned in Co-op will be able to be spent in the in-game economy, transferred over to the solo campaign.

Deathmatch was less broadly innovative, though by no means less fun. Deathmatch stages featured tiered levels and all the startling detail of the solo campaign. Of note, players had the ability to choose between specific bonuses before heading into a round of versus fighting, including larger clips, increased speed, or the ability to see enemies through walls, for example. This slight customizability made for a spicier Deathmatch experience, as each villain or hero could have a different combat edge. Flatly put, it felt more personal. These bonuses could also be chosen for Plunder levels, which simply involved grabbing treasure and bringing it to a drop point ... like capture the flag. There's no word on how much of the

"Uncharted 2 is truly like Tomb Raider on steroids. Among Thieves? More like Among Goodness."

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System: Xbox 360, PlayStation 3 | **Developer:** Blue Castle Games | **Publisher:** Capcom | **Available:** TBA

DEAD RISING 2

Good... Bad... He's the guy with the paddle-saw.

words Casey Loe

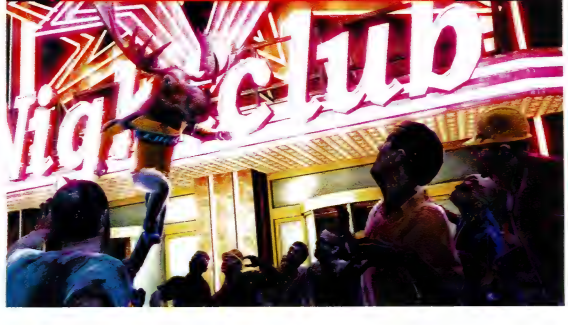
Any fears that Blue Castle Games would be a poor steward for the Dead Rising franchise vanished only moments into the game's guided demo. That's when new hero Chuck Greene began swinging a boat paddle that had a chainsaw tied to either end, and then mounted it onto a motorbike and gunned it through a mob of zombies, leaving a trail of dismembered limbs in his wake. It isn't enough that any object that isn't nailed down can be used as a weapon—they had to start making new ones up, too. What better metaphor for a series defined by thrilling and ridiculous excess?

But it hadn't always been clear that Dead Rising's creators were on the same wavelength as its fans. "When we first mentioned that we wanted to take Dead Rising to a Western developer, there were a lot of negative comments," admits Dead Rising producer Keiji Inafune. And that was just from *his own staff*. When word of the decision leaked to the series' million-strong fanbase, it sparked more than a few message-board tirades. It certainly didn't reassure anyone when the developer was revealed to be Blue Castle Games, whose three-title catalog consists exclusively of baseball sims.

Inafune had actually been toying with the idea of hiring a western developer since before the original Dead Rising was even released. His goal for that title had been to make a western-style action game, experimenting for the first time with a sandbox structure, comedic elements, and a level of gratuitous violence that would put even Resident Evil to shame. Inafune was delighted when other Japanese developers mistakenly assumed that the game had been developed by a western studio, but was shocked and a little disappointed that Americans immediately pegged the game as having a Japanese feel. Luckily, mixing western structure and gameplay with bright Japanese art direction, slightly stilted dialogue and splash of vaguely foreign weirdness turned out to be a magic formula for critical and commercial success.

"For Dead Rising 2, we decided to go all out and make sure that it was, to the core, a western game," explains Inafune. "Clearly that was going to require a western developer." But Inafune had decided that the Japanese touch was important too, and after an

"When we first mentioned that we wanted to take Dead Rising to a Western developer, there were a lot of negative comments."
Producer Inafune



exhaustive search of North American development studios, was impressed when Blue Castle Games producer Daniel Brady independently cited that same Japanese touch as the key to the game's success. Inafune selected the studio as his best hope for achieving his new goal for the series: finding the perfect balance between western and eastern game design. While the game is being made in Blue Castle's Vancouver's office, Inafune is managing the project on a day-to-day basis alongside the Japanese director of Dead Rising 1.

It's nice that they have Inafune on speed dial, but what the hell does the studio behind MLB Front Office Manager know about zombies? Do they even *have* zombie outbreaks in Canada? Blue Castle's lack of experience in the genre has provoked much skepticism among fans, but was never an issue for Inafune. "You know, for everybody there's a first," he muses. "For me, Dead Rising was my first sandbox game. You never know if something is going to work out when it's the first time. But you can't be afraid to try something new... Rather than placing focus on the things [Blue Castle] has done in the past, I'd rather focus on what they're thinking about doing in the present, and what sort of ideas and concepts they've got. In the end, that's what's going to be crucial to developing a good game."

His faith seems justified, as Blue Castle has proven to have some startlingly powerful tech. The original Dead Rising team made it a priority to squeeze the largest zombie body count possible out of Capcom's proprietary MT Framework engine, and in the end managed to pack 500 zombies into a single area. Blue Castle, starting from scratch without even a snippet of Capcom code, beat the original team by a factor of *fourteen*. In a demo running on actual Xbox 360 hardware, Brady cranked up the zombie count to 7,000, packing them shoulder to shoulder throughout Fortune City's main strip. (The frame rate did chug a bit at times, but was surprisingly solid, even at this early stage, with only a slightly reduced zombie count.) Ironically, it was having to start completely from scratch that made this impressive feat possible. "One of the advantages we had is that we weren't stuck with the limitations of having an engine which had to be, to a degree, watered down in order to support multiple games," explains Brady. "We made this specifically for Dead Rising 2, and coming out of the gate we knew exactly what the most important thing was here: zombies, zombies, zombies, and more zombies."

We couldn't do an exact headcount, but the estimate seemed pretty accurate when Brady did a quick circuit of the main strip on the paddle-saw-equipped motorcycle and generated a four-digit body count in the process.

"Just because you have more zombies doesn't necessarily mean your game is going to be more exciting," notes Inafune. "But one thing you can say for sure is that by having a lot more zombies it opens up a lot more possibilities as to what weapons you can use within a large crowd." An exact number hasn't been determined, but Brady promises significantly more than the 120 weapons that were in the original game. New entries include a giant moose head, which hero Chuck Greene can wear as he charges through a crowd of zombies, impaling them with the antlers. There's also a propane tank with nails sticking out of it, which Chuck can swing as a crude bludgeon, or plant directly into the back of a zombie. With the nails holding it in place, he can back up and fire off a shot to detonate the tank, causing a circular wave of zombies to collapse like a grisly crop circle.

That sort of pinpoint accuracy is possible thanks to a complete overhaul of the way guns work in the game. Equipping one now shifts the camera to a more over-the-shoulder perspective and brings up a crosshairs for arming. "One of the things that Dead Rising 1 did not do well—and I would argue Capcom in general does not do well—is guns," explains Brady "We made some improvements this time." He then proceeded to run and even strafe while firing an assault rifle. (If Inafune was offended at this not-so-subtle dig at Resident Evil 5, he didn't show it.) Another new twist to the combat is the procedural cutting of zombies, which allows bladed weapons to cleave off zombie chunks based on the exact angle in which they're sliced, parting them straight down the middle, cutting off the tips of their heads, or removing a calf to send them tumbling pathetically to earth. Finally, Brady promises immense improvements in the way vehicles handle, and the role they play in the game. While only the motorbike has yet been revealed,

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DEAD RISING 2

> "A casino town like Las Vegas is also very symbolic of America." Producer Inafune

its controls are sharp enough that Chuck can do donuts around zombie mobs, and the ability to mount weapons on the bike provides the potential to transform it into a ridiculously deadly killing machine.

So far, combat, weapons, and zombie counts are the only aspects of Dead Rising 2 that Capcom is willing to definitively discuss. (But see the interview for the metric ton of hints they're dropping about everything else.) There are a whole lot of important questions yet to answer, but slaughtering zombies in fanciful ways was most of what made Dead Rising great, and the strange east-west partnership behind Dead Rising 2 has ably demonstrated their ability to not just preserve, but build off of that strength. Maybe it's time to start showing some faith, and stop freaking out every time a Japanese franchise turns up in the hands of a North American or European developer? Inafune certainly thinks so. "Compared to other major international publishers, Capcom does not have a very large internal R&D staff. Maybe half of what other major publishers have," explains Inafune. "Globalization is melting the barriers between eastern and western design. Finding the perfect balance between the two is the best way for Capcom to innovate." And if that argument doesn't convince you, Inafune isn't above playing the Street Fighter IV card—remember when we all worried that would suck because it was co-developed by Dimps, a Japanese licensed-game developer that seemed to be in way over their heads? "That showed that when we partner with the right developers, we can create something fantastic."

Beyond Killing Zombies

Capcom and Blue Castle aren't showing anything beyond the basic engine and combat mechanics of Dead Rising 2 yet, but that doesn't mean they aren't willing to drop plenty of hints about the game's structure, mechanics, and story. Let's take a paddle-saw to the heap of hints they've dropped and see what oozes out.

What the Hell Happened to Frank?!

It's official—say goodbye to war-covering photojournalist Frank West, and hello to Chuck Greene, some dude with a stubble beard. Inafune isn't ruling out the possibility that Frank will play a role in the game, but it doesn't sound like it will be a major one. "In the first game, Frank truly was a great character, and I love him too," Inafune assures us. "Everyone realizes the importance of Frank as a character. But by limiting it to Frank, you sort of limit the scope of the story... Chuck is also a fantastic character in his own right. Right now, people just don't know a lot about him. But by the time they're done playing Dead Rising 2, they're going to say Chuck is a great character, and just as good as Frank if not better." Brady and the rest of the Blue Castle Games staff were shocked by Inafune's decision, but eventually came around. "It'll become clear right away why we chose this character, and they're very, very good reasons," Brady adds. "And it's stuff you're not expecting."

Dead Rising: Fortune City Stories

When the first shots of Dead Rising 2 emerged, it was widely assumed to take place in and around a single casino. But the developers have a much larger scope in mind. "Fortune City is not just a single casino," promises Inafune. "It's like Las Vegas, where there are several casinos all over the place, and a main strip that connects to a lot of different places. It's going to be a much larger map." But despite the wider scope, they aren't trying to

make it feel more sandbox-y than the original. "There's a lot more variety in this game, but we're not trying to redefine what Dead Rising is, or make this Grand Theft Auto," explains Brady. "The world is quite a lot larger than Dead Rising 1, and it's going to feel very fresh, but still comfortable."

Why model the setting after Las Vegas? Inafune takes a turn for the deep: "We chose the mall [in Dead Rising 1] because it's such a symbolic building of America. America is *about* the shopping mall. That is America in a nutshell. A casino town like Las Vegas is also very symbolic of America. We wanted something that would make people feel 'Ah, this is a slice of America.'"

Only 72 Hours Until... Something!

The game's basic structure hasn't changed much, explains Brady. "In the original game, you had to survive 72 hours in the mall. And a lot of people really seemed to like the tension that brought to the game. So we're very keen on keeping that as one of the key aspects of the game—you have to survive for 72 hours. Why that is in Dead Rising 2 directly relates to the story and that's something we're not going to touch on at this time." However, both developers promise that while the game will still incorporate the same basic sub-quests of the original—rescuing survivors and battling psychos—there will also be several new types of quests competing for the players' limited time.

Photography, In or Out?

Frank may be gone, but surely Chuck has a camera phone, right? If he does, Inafune answers, don't expect him to use it. "The original Dead Rising was about Frank West, who was a photographer. But it's not like photographers are going to be the only survivors of a zombie invasion. There are a lot of different types of people with a lot of different professions around. The original was about that one man and how his profession helped him to get to the truth. This one is about Chuck Greene, who also has some very unique skills and a unique profession that is going to be one of the key areas of the game."

Brady offers a few more details. "There's a lot of ways to get PP. We don't have a camera for our main character, that's for certain. But there are a lot of things that our main character does have. He has a daughter. He has this thing where he rides motorcycles. He has a lot of different things that define his personality which are quite different from Frank West. But they create new gameplay mechanics that Inafune has specified for the game, which are completely unique, and completely fresh. We think the users are really going to appreciate some of the unique ideas that Inafune has come up with. It's been a core focus for them right from day one." A teaser trailer did reveal that Chuck was a single father and showed him carrying a stuffed animal through a crowd of zombies, which might be a clue to one of the new game mechanics. (Then again it may well be a new weapon filled with plastic explosives and corkscrews or something.)

> "One of the things that Dead Rising 1 did not do well—and I would argue Capcom in general does not do well—is guns."
> **Producer Brady**

No More Racing to the Crapper?

The original Dead Rising had a strict save system that provided only one save slot and forced players to spend their limited time running to one of a handful of public toilets to preserve their progress. When they died, players were also given the option of deleting the save file to begin a new game with their current stats. "Of course we realized that that was one of the areas where people had a lot of complaints about the first title, so we are going to make sure to make it better," Inafune promises. But Brady also offers a glimmer of hope to those who loved the challenge and intensity of the original system. "The save system was very polarizing for the users. I think it wasn't just obvious that it was wrong. A lot of users appreciated the idea that it actually created a sense of dread in the world...one where dying actually meant something in the game. The problem is that you could get into positions where you could not finish the game if you saved at the wrong moment. And that really sucked. *Really sucked*. What we're doing this time is we're trying to find a balance... We are fixing that problem, and we're doing some interesting stuff there. We still do want to keep a sense of dread in there, but we don't think there are going to be any complaints with the system we're creating this time."

Where Drill Buckets Come From

At one point in the demo, Chuck picks up a metal bucket that has three electric drills poking through the bottom, and drops it onto a zombie's head, causing a torrent of blood as its head is drilled to pieces. That seems an unlikely item to just find lying around, and the developers concede the point, answering the question with a question of their own: "how often do *you* find a bucket with drills sticking out of it?" Now that Linens 'n Things is out of business, *never*. So between the nail-propane-tank, the paddle-saw, and the drill-bucket, I think it's safe to assume that Dead Rising 2 has some sort of weapon-combination system.

This may tie in to the only significant change to the game's on-screen display; in addition to a lifebar, PP bar, character level, and the usual inventory of weapons, Chuck has a money counter. What the hell is Chuck going to do with money during a zombie invasion? "He's not going to eat it," Inafune answers. Thanks for clearing that up!

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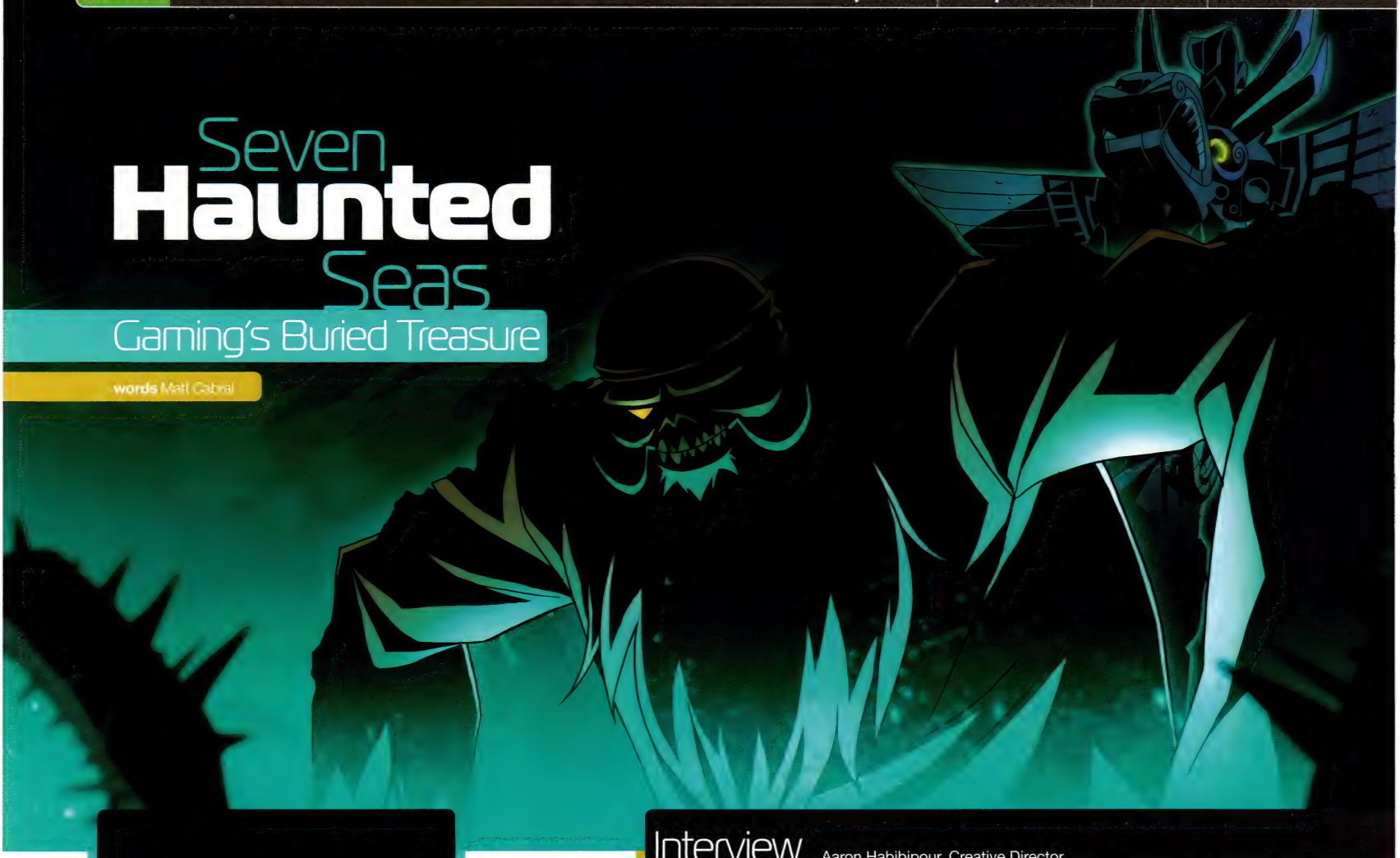
System: TBA | **Developer:** Titmouse | **Publisher:** TBA | **Available:** TBA

Seven Haunted Seas

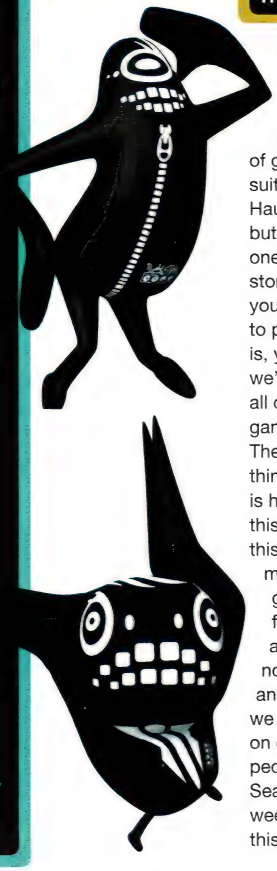
Gaming's Buried Treasure

words Matt Cabral



If you tried following any of the "big" news coming out of this year's Game Developer's Conference, you were no doubt bombarded by the buzz that a new mad scientist-like contraption was plotting to kill our consoles once and for all (sorry OnLive, you'll have to pry my 360 gamepad from my cold, dead hands). The much less-hyped announcement you likely missed, though, just might have been the coolest news nugget to emerge from the show: the formation of Titmouse Games. The new game development house is no stranger to creating groundbreaking entertainment—just check out Adult Swim's *Metalocalypse* to see what their animation arm is capable of. The very thought of this creative crew lending their twisted talent to game-making had us giddy even before we spied the trailer for their first announced title, Seven Haunted Seas, a super-stylized action RPG starring a pirate named Scurvy Pete. But upon viewing the potential-packed teaser—several times in a row—we knew we had to sit down with this band of budding game-building scalawags.

"The minute you start chasing focus tests and stuff like that, I think you're giving up the creative side."



Interview

Aaron Habibipour, Creative Director

Play: What kinds of games do you want to make?

Aaron Habibipour, Creative Director: We don't wanna get lumped into one type of game...it's whatever type of game best suits the IP that we're coming up with. Seven Haunted Seas lends itself to an action RPG, but the next game could be an FPS, the next one an RTS, the next one...it really is about story and character. One of the best things you can do as storytellers is pick any brush to paint with, and whatever the best brush is, you go with it. And it goes beyond games; we're gonna come up with ideas between all of us that could be a better movie than a game, or a better weekly series than a movie. The cool thing is that we can do all these things. And I think this is where the industry is headed, and if it's not it should be. There's this weird separation, and I think it comes from this perception that games are sometimes marketing tools for movies. But that actually got a little dated, and now it's sort of flipping around the other way where movies are now marketing tools for games. But no one is really trying to converge the two and create something new, and that's what we want to do. And we really want to focus on good storytelling and create worlds for people that they can play in. Seven Haunted Seas came from...I had a stack of papers one weekend, and I was drinking beer and drawing this goofy pirate guy with monsters and pirate boats and shit, and I spilled a f***ing beer on the stack of drawings. I put the sketches aside in a drawer and was like "oh f**k, they're ruined!" But when we started talking about putting the studio together, they were like "Hey, we'll develop one of your ideas"...

SS: [laughs] "Do you have anything that's beer-soaked?"

AH: [laughs] Right, and I was like "I have just the thing." So I brought my f***ing stack of crumpled-ass paper and had all these notes and sketches of Pete and the boat, and I handed them to these guys and they were like "Cool—this is awesome!" And that's sort of how it got started. The thing is, if you pitched that to a game corporation, they'd be like "No way!" The idea would have never gotten off the ground anywhere else. Chris [Prynoski], the president of the company, likes to take risks, we all like to take risks, so we're just gonna come up with cool shit and try and get it done. That's the best thing you can do. The minute you start chasing focus tests and stuff like that, I think you're giving up the creative side.

Play: What can you tell us about the game at this point? How representative was the GDC trailer of the final product?

AH: What I wanted to do with the trailer is highlight what you can expect from the game. It's going to be this epic world that this guy gets launched into. After being dead for 1,000

"It's going to be a mix between Fable and Wind Waker, but with a dark, edgy graphic novel look."

years, he comes back and the world is f***ed up, but he's a pirate. And there's no power, but all these destroyers and aircraft carriers and battleships have been pulled back into sail power, and pirates are living in these floating fortresses. It's going to be a mix between Fable and Wind Waker, but with a dark, edgy graphic novel look. It's not gonna be a bunch of "yargh" jokes and "aye matey" stuff...it's not going to be that on the nose, even though he's a pirate. We're going to try and create this deep, rich world that's off, and it's really about things being on their sides and presented in ways they normally wouldn't be; there's a shot at the end of the trailer where you see a cruise ship on its side, and its like this tower now, a pirate stronghold. And Pete comes into this place like "Holy shit, what the hell's going on now?" That's what I want the whole game to feel like to people—"what the hell did I just get into?" And we really want to make traveling by boat f***ing dangerous and fun. You should get into the boat, leave for an island, and think you're not going to make it—that's what it should feel like. We're thinking torrential storms, huge sea creatures, and things that just make traveling to one island to the next really dangerous. It's going to be action RPG style gameplay, but we're not going to do stat management...there's a hardcore RPG guy in me that loves stat management, but I know that really turns off a lot of people. One of the things I think World of Warcraft does so well is hook you in with items and things that visually upgrade you, and I think that's the route we wanna take—upgrading Pete through equipment and stuff he uses on his ship, and stuff that looks cool and does cool things, rather than worrying about how much damage you're adding by putting one more point in strength versus constitution or whatever. It's going to be action intensive with epic level stuff and fighting...sea creatures, weirdo monsters. The sort of shit we think is cool.

Play: Any gameplay specifics like play perspective...
AH: It's third-person action RPG. Traveling by boat will be third-person, and there's going to be a couple of different phases to the combat on the open sea. You'll be able to fire the cannons out of both sides of the ship, but if you're fighting another pirate ship, these harpoon things will come out of the side of your boat...once you take the damage level down to a certain point you can harpoon it and bring it in close to board it. And then it's about getting off the wheel and boarding the ship and fighting the guys on the ship.

Play: Level based or open-world?
AH: We're going to try for open-world, but whether it's open and seamless, I'm not sure. To me, saying that something is "open" is gimmicky. It doesn't have to be seamless. It's going to be a persistent world that you can travel around in. Whether there's a loading screen or not...if I had to have a 30 second load to make one of the islands that you go to really f***ing cool, then it's worth it to me.

And the cool art style we've seen in the trailer and screens is representative of what the final game will look like?
AH: It's our mission statement for the game. That's the look and tone we're going to go for, and the level of polish that we want to put on it.

Play: And at what stage of development is the game? Is there a playable version of it out there somewhere.
AH: We're prototyping now, but I'd say we'll have something more to show at E3.

The beauty of gold.

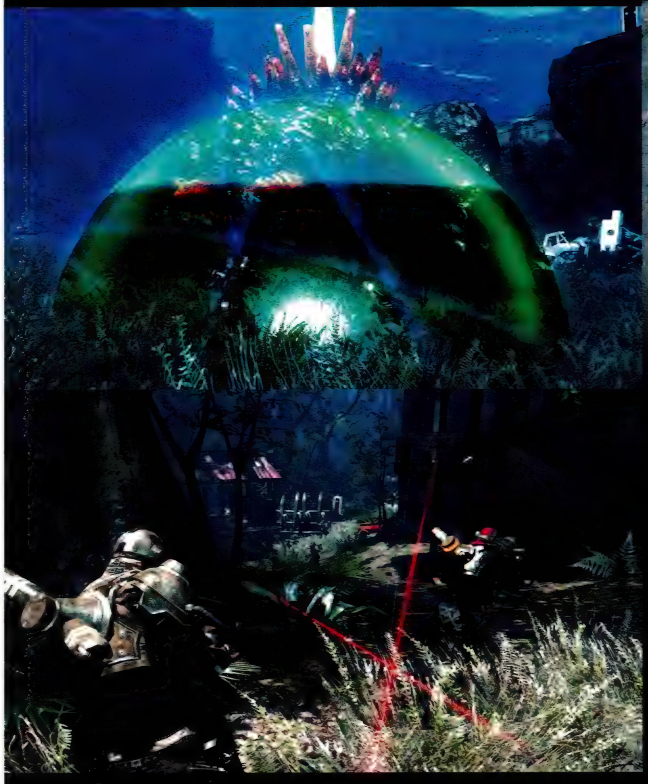
Lost Planet 2

Sucks to be you, Lee Byung-Hun

words Casey Loe

The original Lost Planet was an unprecedented achievement for a Japanese developer, offering a competitive online multiplayer experience that was both competent and unique, and inspiring a small but passionate online community in the process. It isn't clear how many of the title's two-million-plus buyers were interested in online space-pirate wars, and how many came for the game's enjoyable single-player campaign mode, but with Lost Planet 2, Capcom is clearly doubling down on the online side. The game's campaign mode has been expanded to four-player co-op, the original title's cast has been scrapped in favor of user-created heroes, and the developers have implemented a new Call of Duty-inspired leveling system and several new community features. Those who are keen on playing solo may be out of luck; the campaign mode requires a party of four, and it's hard to imagine that it'll be much fun playing with a bunch of AI companions to whom you can't even issue basic orders.

Director Jun Takeuchi is no stranger to taking big gambles, having kicked off Lost Planet 2 development while simultaneously directing Resident Evil 5's controversial overhaul into a co-op focused title. "What distinguishes [Capcom's successful titles] is



What happened to the snow?

"LP 2 looks absolutely beautiful, and marks an impressive debut for the 2.0 version of Capcom's MT Framework Engine."

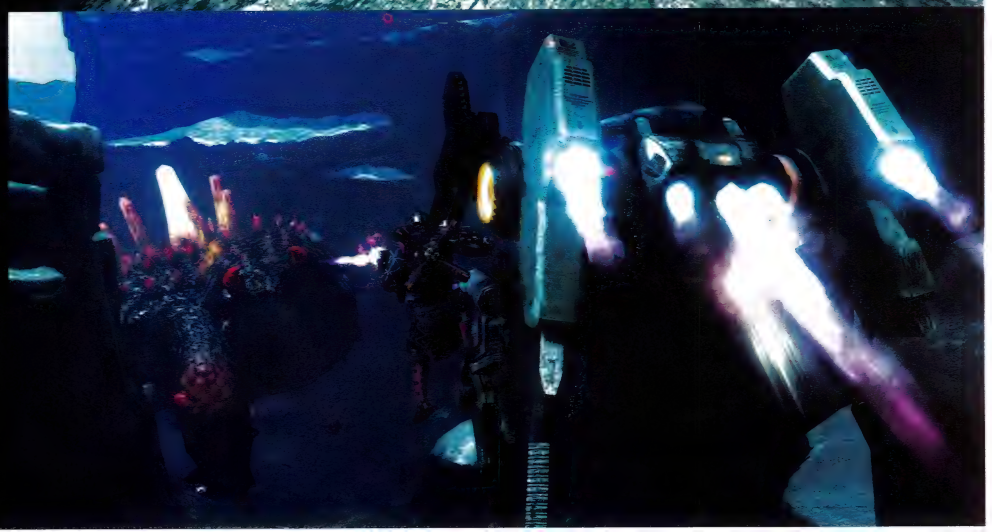
that they're based on around well-known characters and strong storylines, the things Capcom is known for," he suggests. "On Lost Planet 2, we're trying to do something a little different from that." While the original Lost Planet focused on a strong central character based on Korean actor Lee Byung-Hun, the key marketing image of the sequel is an army of user-created characters standing between an arsenal of new weapons and a dozen VS mech suits. The character customization options are vast and impressive, offering scores of snap-on heads, torsos, and legs to choose from, both for male and female characters, and plenty of color variations for each. Players can also customize weapons and choose from a humorous array of dramatic poses and victory dances that can be assigned to D-pad quick keys. But the focus on customizable heroes doesn't mean the team has abandoned their storytelling ambitions; Lost Planet 2 has a strong central storyline, and Takeuchi promises that it's a good one. "The unique thing about the story is that it takes place in a sort of omnibus format, in which there are many different characters doing different things in the world. As you play through the game, you'll be playing through Scenario A, Scenario B, and Scenario C, which may not seem to have any particular connection to each other. However, if you play through the end of the game, you'll understand everything that's been happening, and how the stories are linked to each other."

Gameplay seems similar to the first game, with a grappling hook that allows players to quickly traverse steep terrain and an ever-dwindling supply of Thermal Energy that fuels health regeneration and other character abilities. But Inafune's team has taken careful note of player requests, and revised the control scheme to include a dash command. The arsenal of available weapons has been expanded dramatically, and now includes shields and bladed weapons as well as guns. There are also plenty of new Vital Suits, including ones that can seat multiple players. One promise that Takeuchi reiterated repeatedly is that the game will have a "hell of a lot of content," offering far more levels, weapons, suits, multiplayer modes, and multiplayer maps than the original. That amount will be further increased with frequent releases of downloadable content, accessible directly from the main menu and advertised with in-game news updates. In addition to DLC that's been planned from the start (Takeuchi claims his team is making more game than can possibly fit on the disc), the dev team will stay on the job long after release to respond to the desires of its community. "One of the things we want to do with Lost Planet 2 is be able to answer the requests of the fans as soon as possible, and create the things they want to see in the game. If users say that they want a particular item in the game, or a particular set of rules to use in multiplayer, we want to be able to give that to them as soon as we can."

It's hard to tell from the brief amount of gameplay we've been shown, but the co-op campaign mode seems to have a new focus on bosses that has invited comparisons to Capcom's own Monster Hunter series. The boss fight demoed by Takeuchi's team was as thrilling as one could ever hope to see, featuring a colossal, slug-like amphibious beast that rose dramatically from the sea before thundering through lightly wooded wetlands. Takeuchi promises multiple ways to defeat each foe, and demonstrated that characters could blast this one from afar (aiming for the familiar glowing spots), use their grappling hooks to rise atop it and strike at its glowing spines, or even grapple their way into the beast's mouth and digestive track, where they'll struggle against a current of stomach acids to blast at throbbing internal organs. Once defeated—a process that took several minutes—the flesh melted from the creature's bones to leave only a massive skeleton behind.

Lost Planet 2 looks absolutely beautiful, and marks an impressive debut for the 2.0 version of Capcom's MT Framework Engine. Of particular note was the lush, heavily-vegetated terrain, which dynamically sways as it's blown by the wind or caught in the shockwaves of explosions. (The trademark snowscapes of Lost Planet began melting away at the end of the original game, and this game takes place several years later.) The demo we were shown was running on a PC, but Takeuchi promises the 360 version is nearly as far along. As for a PS3 version, Takeuchi is still being coy. "Right now we are concentrating on development for 360. We are hoping that there are other things we'll be able to announce down the line." (How soon that announcement will come will presumably depend on the number of zeroes on Microsoft's check.)

Capcom's press event in Monte Carlo proved to be an apt setting for Lost Planet 2's debut, as multiplayer-focused games are among the highest-risk, highest-reward gambles in gaming. If perfectly executed, Lost Planet could become the next Call of Duty, but if Takeuchi's team loses touch with its fans' expectations, they could end up with the next Shadowrun instead. Capcom won't have to wait long before the verdicts starts rolling in; the original Lost Planet built an expectant fanbase through frequent and early demo releases, and Takeuchi is eager to do the same for its sequel. The guided demo of the slug-like boss we were shown will be playable at E3, and while Takeuchi wasn't able to make a definitive promise, he hopes to release it publicly over XBLA at the same time.



System: Xbox 360, PS3, PC | **Developer:** Rocksteady | **Publisher:** Warner Bros. Interactive Ent. Eidos | **Available: Late** Summer 2009

BATMAN: ARKHAM ASYLUM

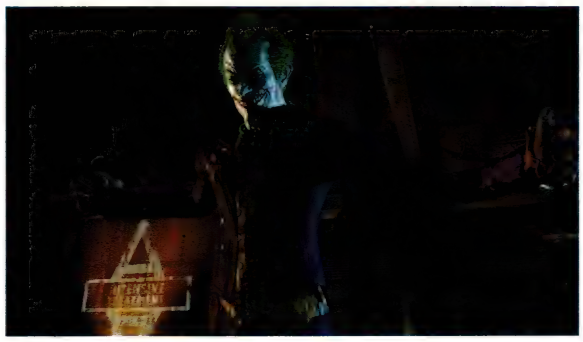
Fear? He is fear

words Dave Halverson

The metamorphosis is complete. With Batman: Arkham Asylum, the Batman franchise has officially undergone its second renovation. Rest in peace Batman; long live the Dark Knight. Going back and looking at Batman's TV origins is a strange thing. Not only does it reflect how much the character has changed, but how much we have changed along with him. The Batman from 1966 would be in therapy for the rest of his days if he met Paul Dini's Joker in Arkham Asylum. And poor little Dick Grayson would surely wet his panty hose and run home to mama at the mere sight of Harley Quinn. Our innocence circa 1966 is lost; may it never be found.

We all owe Tim Burton a huge debt of thanks. It was his back-to-back feature films, after all, that ultimately spawned the franchise as we know it today. We'd never have found our way to today's Batman without a connecting flight from Burton's Goth excursion. Joel Schumacher nearly crashed the party with his rendition of Batman De Soleil soon after, but like a cockroach with a cape—the Bat crawled all the way back. Any franchise that can survive nipple armor and cinematography by Skittles deserves our complete and undivided attention.

Batman's video game ascension has been as fickle as his movie career. Although Kemco's Dark Tomorrow marks the only real disaster—and it was biblical—few Batman games have managed to rise above mediocrity. Sunsoft's NES, Mega-Drive, and PC Engine trio kicked



"...there are so many ways to evoke fear and exterminate the sitting ducks around Arkham, it's like a game unto itself."

things off well enough but it's been all over the map since. Konami and Clockwork Tortoise did 2D right for the SNES and Genesis (respectively) with The Adventures of Batman and Robin, but Ubisoft's Batman: Vengeance and EA's Batman Begins mark the only two quality 3D outings. Well, they used to. Arkham Asylum is to Batman's video game concern what Batman Begins was to its cinematic coffers. The Batman within is closer to what you'll find in graphic novels like Year One or Hush—more Bale than Keaton—but he's closest to Simon Bisley's Black & White version, and this, my friends, is a very good thing. I like the new realistic Bale Batman just fine, but I like my video games exaggerated and this guy is scary. He's also just a little bit off... as he should be. Batman's a freak; he's just a good, perpetually pissed-off freak. The story, penned by Paul Dini, is in a word, great—obviously and skillfully written as a video game, and a pitch-black one at that. After a brief ride in the Batmobile to Arkham where Batman unloads his cargo, Joker, the entire intro unfolds as a playable perp walk into the depths of the asylum as the setup unfolds all around you. Tis a brilliant thing; not only are we introduced to many of the cast members, including Killer Croc, who lets Batman know exactly how he feels (about killing him), but we also get a good look at one of the most beautifully textured and robust settings in all of gaming. By the end of the journey Joker is in control of the entire facility by way of his cohort Harley Quinn, and it's game on.

If you're looking for a timeline, Batgirl (Barbara Gordon) has been paralyzed and become the Oracle; that should point you in the general direction.

The gameplay is rife with detective work, similar to Monolith's Condemned, only to a much greater degree, where a mode change allows Batman to use forensic tools to get on the trail of whomever he's stalking. It's also used to see through walls, reveal switches, find grapple points and false walls, and so on, drawing us into the Batman mythos like never before. The FreeFlow Battle system is another high point. As groups of Arkham muscle heads attack simultaneously, pressing triangle (as a non-obtrusive prompt signals a punch is about to land) initiates a counter to keep the combo chain going, while other prompts lead to myriad moves depending on how deep into the adventure you are, and how you've evolved Batman's gadgets and melee abilities. Both are in a constant state of flux as you use experience to bolster armor, skills, combo strikes, and weapon skills via WayneTech, accesible at any time via the pause menu. I was approximately 40% into the game (which is still being fine tuned) and new moves just kept coming. Batman can also stealth kill by hiding and waiting, sneaking, hanging...there are so many ways to evoke fear and exterminate the sitting ducks around Arkham, it's like a game unto itself. Batman really comes into his own as a natural born predator. The stealth in Arkham Asylum is pitch (black) perfect too, by way of the environments, which play a dual role. Exploring the vast open world at the heart of the island, the game takes on a dark open-world feel, while the vast interiors of the Botanical Gardens, Intensive Treatment Medical Facility, Penitentiary, and Arkham Mansion, immerse you in deep exploration, environmental puzzles taken to an entirely new level, and to put it ever so lightly, the kind of wholesale violence and mind games only Joker and friends could muster. They don't get any more twisted, and Harley... well, she deserves a game of her own after this. All the while, collecting Riddler Trophies opens Character Bios that offer Facts, Attributes and Patient Interviews on all the wonderful inhabitants you'll have the pleasure of meeting and maybe killing—including Mr. Zasz, Poison Ivy, Clayface, Bane, and many, many, many more. Bane is actually one of the game's initial bosses and he definitely delivers.

The pieces I love most about the Arkham puzzle so far must remain under wraps, and rightly so, as this is one game that spoilers would actually spoil. All I need to say is that it's everything a great Batman game should be, taken to the extreme and bathed in black.

System: Wii (DL), PS3, Xbox 360, PC (II) | **Developer:** Climax (DL), Triumph Studios (II) | **Publisher:** Codemasters | **Available:** June

Overlord Dark Legend / Overlord II

Mischief makers

words Dave Halverson

All hail the Overlord! And I mean "all." Triumph Studios must have made quite an impression on Codemasters with Overlord and Overlord Raising Hell. Not only did they buy the IP, they bought the studio, and then ordered up three distinctly different sequels; two from Climax (Overlord Minions for DS and Overlord Dark Legend for Wii) and of course Triumph's proper sequel, Overlord II for PS3 and Xbox360. Works for me; I've been card-carrying since I nuzzled my first Brown. Any evil being I can command to kill, burn, or maim whatever, whenever is a friend of mine. Farm animals beware—we're back!

You just don't see publishers buy an IP and then ship it off to get made somewhere else these days, or any day for that matter, but in the case of Dark Legend it makes perfect sense. Hiring enough new talent to concoct a Wii game at Triumph along with all the equipment would not only cost a fortune and balloon the studio, but two Overlords in one castle? No way. Better to leave them be and dial up a shop with some wicked Wii tech, like Climax, makers of Sudeki, ATV Offroad Fury, Tron 2.0 Killer App, Silent Hill Origins, and Lizzie McGuire 3! One thing Climax knows how to do is build engines, and they've put together another great one for the Wii. Dark Legend looks shockingly good. It comes at a price—don't look too close, or too far—but it's impressive as all heck. Great animation too, and I love the character design. The story in Dark Legend is a bit lighter than Overlord II's, but only due to its fairy tale nature. It carries the same T-rating as Overlord II, so don't expect too much mercy. Farm animals were harmed in the making of this game. Presented as a prequel to the original, the adventure begins as the youngest of the three Gromgard siblings comes into possession of the mysterious gauntlet on his 16th birthday and begins his career of evil. After binding with the Overlord armor and meeting your faithful servant Gnarl down in the castle keep (revealed the same day coincidentally), a quick jaunt around the castle beating on Halflings and dishing out a little payback on your siblings reveals the ease in which Dark Legend controls. Given the nature of Overlord's interface, the action seems more at home on the Wii than it does on console. Sweeping (guiding your minions along narrow paths to perform various tasks) is as simple as holding B and guiding the pointer along the ground. The same

"One thing Climax knows how to do is build engines, and they've put together another great one for the Wii."

And so it begins... Now, where can I find some sheep? These guys look hungry.

"Any evil being I can command to kill, burn, or maim whatever, whenever is a friend of mine..."

goes for attacking and performing tasks; wherever you point and click, they go. The newly christened Overlord attacks with Z and summons minions by holding or tapping A. It doesn't get much more intuitive.

For the uninitiated, the Overlord commands four types of vile, nasty, little minions: Browns for general mayhem; Reds for putting out fires and heaving fireballs at ranged targets; Blues for swimming and crossing streams; and Greens for clearing poisonous gas, all in the name of looting and pillaging your way to vast riches through wholesale pacification. Like the original, collecting life-force allows you to summon more minions; looting fills your treasury, paving the way to forging better weapons and armor; and spells, carried and deposited at waypoints by your minions, give the Overlord a growing quiver of powers to frighten all who oppose him into submission. I'm sure you'll be classing up the keep too, although there's no sign of any wenches and Gnarl hasn't mentioned it, so it remains to be seen if Lord Gromgard will have a happy 17th birthday or not. The only major differences thus far are the kinder nature of the Overlord himself—he doesn't kill peasants; the horror—and the ability to shake and bake minions and send them skipping off to blow up spiky barriers. It's a peculiar design choice, given they're made of wood (your Reds should be able to incinerate them), but I suppose these things will come to light as we cross over into fairy tale territory. So far, however, so (very) good.

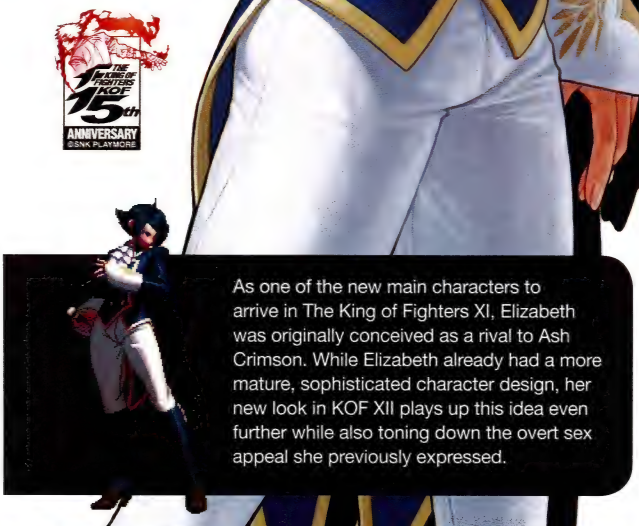
There's not much to say about the PS3 and 360 versions yet other than to rave about the majorly upgraded visuals. "Both games look absolutely stunning" I raved. Neither was buttoned up enough to comment on performance, but I do love the new ability to saddle up my minions on wolves (I've never seen them look happier) and the new level design seems wonderfully quixotic and riddle laden. The T-rating is troubling, given there's two kid-friendly versions on the way; I was really hoping to see some heavy meat eating and a much hotter selection of potential wenches, but I'm sure Triumph will push it to the limits. They're not exactly known for holding back.

System: PS3, 360 | **Developer:** SNK Playmore | **Publisher:** Ignition Entertainment | **Available:** July 2009

The King of Fighters XII

Sorry boys... no HD bounce just yet.

words Eric L. Patterson



Elizabeth Blanctorche

Home exclusive character

As one of the new main characters to arrive in The King of Fighters XI, Elizabeth was originally conceived as a rival to Ash Crimson. While Elizabeth already had a more mature, sophisticated character design, her new look in KOF XII plays up this idea even further while also toning down the overt sex appeal she previously expressed.

Man, that Ash chick sure is hot.

Fifteen years. Fifteen years since The King of Fighters made its debut on the arcade stage, starting its journey to becoming SNK's most popular fighting franchise. I still remember when I considered KOF to be the crazy new kid on the block when compared to SNK's other, more established fighters.

Wow I feel old right now.

As the series celebrates its 15th anniversary, SNK Playmore decided the best present it could give KOF would be to completely destroy everything that existed and rebuild it anew.

A daring, slightly dangerous decision, but also one that really needed to be made.

Finally getting my hands on The King of Fighters XII after what seemed like years of being teased with screenshots or shaky hand-cam videos, what hit me instantly was that this is a game that is both completely familiar and totally foreign to me. This is KOF; but, this is not KOF. KOF XII is going to exist in a strange world, sitting between everything we've come to learn over these last fifteen years and a place we've yet to go. Kyo feels like the Kyo I was introduced to back in 1994; Kensou looks like his 1986 Psycho Soldier self but plays like an alternate-universe Kensou I've never met before.

In fact, for a longtime KOF fan, everything about KOF XII is at first totally unsettling. Holy crap these characters are so big! Wait, this feel like KOF, yet it kind of doesn't. What in the world was that crazy counter thing I just pulled off?

A great number of hours with the preview version later, and I'm still not totally comfortable with KOF XII. At levels shallow, and at levels deep, SNK Playmore has not just taken the KOF series we've known up to the point of KOF XI and slapped a pretty new face on it; this is, unquestionably, the birth of a new King of Fighters. Even before I get the chance to play it online, even before I'm ready to pass serious judgement on it, I can tell you that this is a game that will require patience from you. You're going to need to go into this one with an open mind and the willingness to let it grow on you. We've had fifteen years of comfort (well, except for those rather unpleasant "Strikers" years); it's time we prepare ourselves to learn all over again what exactly the name "The King of Fighters" means.

Make no mistake, however; KOF XII is of course also about the "visual refresh" side of things as well. Taking in the visuals of what SNK Playmore has produced here feels like looking into a world that shouldn't exist. What may be most impressive technically is the backgrounds we've been given, stages that contain such

Fun with Filters

The King of Fighters XII retains the ability to put into effect sprite filtering, allowing players to choose from four different filtering levels, ranging from no filtering (left pic) up through the highest of three filters (right pic).

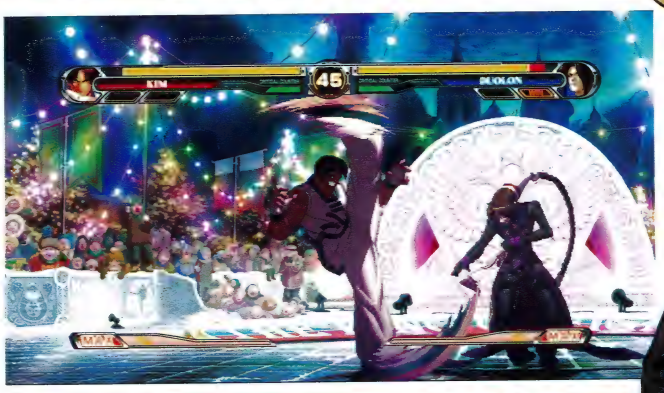
an overload of minute details that I'm not sure I've ever seen such amazing 2D backgrounds before. What really got me was how these backgrounds, along with the character sprites themselves, just *ooze* that classic NeoGeo style. When you see the new higher-res Kyo, or Iori, or Athena, or whomever, it can be as much of a shock as the differences in gameplay may be, and yet, the more you look at them, the more you are amazed at how utterly old-school, traditional SNK they are. Anybody afraid the game may end up looking less KOF and more BlazBlue due to the transition to a higher definition need not lose any sleep. SNK Playmore has done in KOF XII what I never thought they would be able to do: truly retain their trademark graphical style while pushing the visual detail to a whole new level.

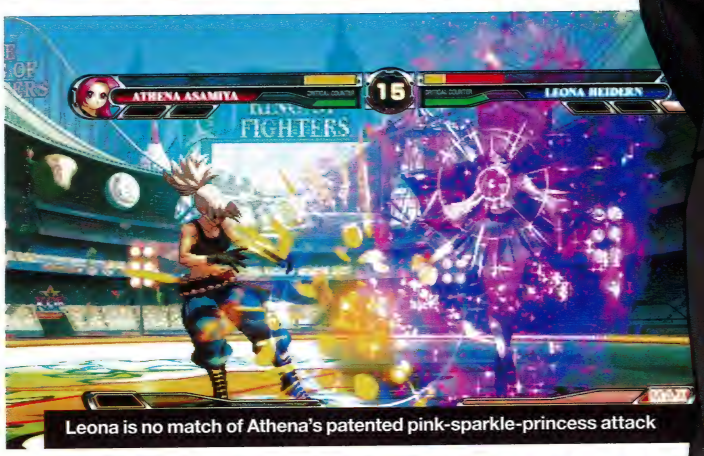
And, of course, we have now been introduced to the two home exclusive characters: Elizabeth and Mature. Yes folks, all the talk about brand-new artwork for K' and Mai showing up on SNK Playmore's Japanese website in the end meant nothing. (I've argued over and over: you don't use the home release of KOF XII to re-debut major characters.)

Elizabeth is no surprise, as she was part of the original promotional materials for KOF XII until mysteriously disappearing. (Maybe she couldn't be finished in time for the arcade version?) Coming as a total shock, however, is Mature. I mean, Mature? Really? Don't get me wrong, I love Mature, but having her be the second new character is simply peculiar, especially without Vice in tow. And speaking of Vice, is SNK Playmore going to do a head-swap to bring her back in the next game? Mature's new threads work for her, but I'm not sure it will make as much sense being duplicated for Vice like their older outfits did.

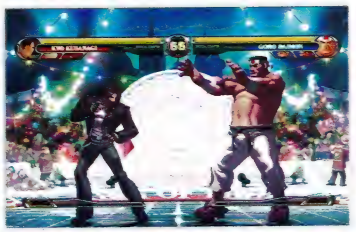
Oh, and what exactly happened to Mature's eye anyhow?

My time spent with The King of Fighters XII so far leaves me excited yet nervous. This is a game that will have a lot to prove, not only to people new to the series, but also to longtime fans as well. I'm not just curious to see what all of you out there are going to think of the game once you've really sunk your teeth into it; I'm curious to see what I myself will think as well.



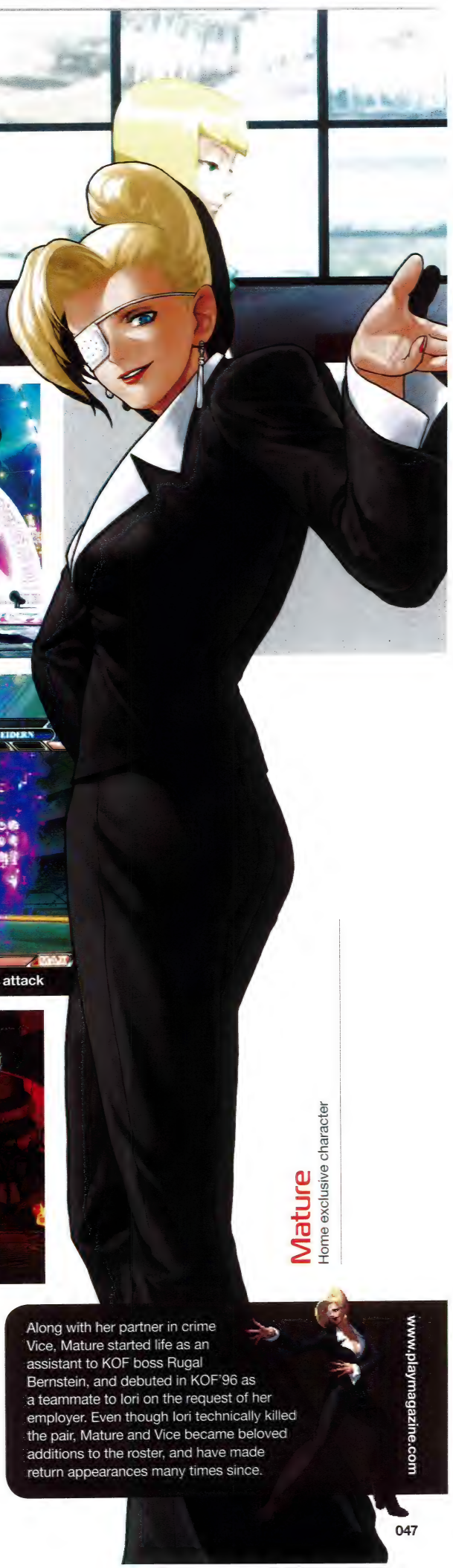


Leona is no match of Athena's patented pink-sparkle-princess attack



Size Matters

Things certainly have changed since the original King of Fighters '94. When zoomed in, KOF XII's sprites are simply huge, almost reminding one of the days of Art of Fighting 3. Just look at these two comparison shots, and especially note the difference in Goro Daimon.



Mature

Home exclusive character

Along with her partner in crime Vice, Mature started life as an assistant to KOF boss Rugal Bernstein, and debuted in KOF'96 as a teammate to Iori on the request of her employer. Even though Iori technically killed the pair, Mature and Vice became beloved additions to the roster, and have made return appearances many times since.

System: PS3, PC | **Developer:** SOE Seattle | **Publisher:** SOE | **Multi:** Massively | **Available:** Fall

The Agency

Spies like us

words Mike Griffin

It's good to see Sony Online Entertainment finally stretching its massively multiplayer wings on PS3, with Free Realms, DC Universe Online, and The Agency, the charming spy shooter you're looking at, all slated for release over the next year. As SOE staff reiterated during my visit to its Seattle studio, this trend isn't merely the byproduct of the integration of SOE and SCEA. The arrival of a powerful console with a hard drive in every box was the turning point, fulfilling an essential MMO requirement. I might play The Agency on PC myself, but my time with the game has proven that the PS3 is surprisingly adept at the form. I met SOE Seattle's Creative Director, Matt Wilson, for an entertaining demo and chat.

Agents of change

First and foremost, what makes The Agency a spy-themed action shooter? Many a massively multiplayer title has attempted to slap a specific theme on the experience, and it ends up being a thin veil over a stale, tired MMO template. That is not the case here. The Agency celebrates its spy theme from head to toe, starting with primary factions. The good guys are Unite, slick and suave Bond-esque super agents. They're into chic haute couture, expensive martinis, high-tech gadgets and eminently disposable luxury performance cars. Their nemesis is Paragon, the misfits and masterminds of the criminal underworld, clad in all manner of eccentric gear and more likely to roll up to the party in a Hummer tricked out with rockets.

"Yeah, Paragon is pretty much the guns for hire. They're disgruntled ex-military, ex-bikers … rough and tumble guys. It doesn't mean they don't have style like Unite has. Theirs is going to be crazy t-shirts and fatigues, that sort of style. More Sylvester Stallone than Daniel Craig," Matt tells **play**. Unite agents will launch their careers aboard the Sophia II, a huge passenger airship on its maiden voyage over Europe. Paragon players begin life along the sweltering Mosquito Coast in South America, surfacing from a smelly shipping container. Both factions will introduce seasoned agents to the player to expose the storyline and characters, all told in a slightly sardonic and playful tone. Think Get Smart and Charlie's Angels, with game nods to influences like No One Lives Forever and Team Fortress 2. Your role in the spy world initially defined, the next step is to select a combat style and expand your agent's versatility via skills, gadgets and operatives.

"You'll be choosing a clear role: either combat, stealth, or support. As you play those different roles and advance them, you'll also be collecting operatives that

"...pretty much the whole level is asynchronous loaded because we can't fit it on a PS3 without doing that!"

– Matt Wilson, Creative Director, SOE Seattle

"...maybe you find that rare, amazing black tuxedo that gets you into all the soirees."

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help to expand your role. But you'll have to specialize to augment your battle prowess. The ultimate goal is for players to identify with a class and a role, and once they get rolling, augment that with a host of operatives," Matt explains.

You'll be able to collect tons of skills in The Agency, but it will ultimately boil down to your load-out and how many skills you can actively take in the field with your outfit. As you collect different combat, stealth and support outfits, they'll have different accessories like backpacks that affect load-out. All of this allows you to specialize your role in The Agency's PVE and PVP gameplay. Similar to Guild Wars, however, you'll have to lock-in selected skills prior to heading out on a mission, and objectives and party composition play a key role in this decision.

Matt elaborates: "There are lots of buffs. In the mission demo I was using my own stamina and armor buff. There are loads of cooperative party buffs, general debuffs, and DoTs (damage over time). We've been tinkering with poison and DoTs a lot in PVP. The poison just keeps ticking away until you use an antidote, so it suddenly becomes less about shooting and more about staying alive! Other abilities, like that Martini Shaker freeze bomb I used … it's because I have an operative making me gadgets like that. I can give you one too, but that's going to take a load-out slot. So there's always a balance. There will always be far more skills and operatives than you can take out in the field, but it's a pretty open system."

Crafting operatives

When it comes to crafting in MMO titles, I'd often rather take a pass. I explain to Matt that whenever possible, I much prefer to kill for my loot than craft it via tedious tradeskill grinding. "I'm a crafter. I hate crafting—but I love what it makes," he comments. I agree. I'm usually the person that feeds his crafter buddies good materials that I've found so they can make me items. Matt lights up; I'm on to something here.

"What's cool in The Agency is that you can build out your own set of operatives that will do the crafting *for* you. Your operatives will take resources and turn them into items. So you go out and do some missions, and you finally get that cool drop: the operative who can make the Golden Gun." Hang on a sec, crafter operatives can be found as loot? "Yep, an operative is a drop. And depending on what kind of operative you get, they'll be able to do different assignments. They have things they can do for you in the field, and out of field assignments—kind of like Chloe on 24."

A playing card-style profile for each operative fully details its abilities, from snipers, to hackers and crafters. "You'll know exactly what they can do. So you'll be able to tell friends, for example, I got this cool operative that can make the Golden Gun. Everybody's like, holy cow—let's make some Golden Guns! You don't have to craft it, he'll do that for you, but you *do* need to get the resources for it. And your team can work around that; it allows the crafting side of it to be a collective effort, as all important components will be tradable."

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One mandate that SOE Seattle sticks to like glue is the idea that "skill equals skill." Despite an army of possible operatives, loads of outfits and gadgets (from laser pens to grappling hooks), and dozens of different weapon mods spread across three attachment points, The Agency thrusts its core shooter gameplay into the spotlight. If you're a seasoned shooter player, whether first or third-person (there's an on-demand toggle), those strong fundamentals will absolutely pay off in this tight Unreal Engine 3-powered action. Of course any spy that wants to thrive, not just survive, always packs a few toys in with the guns; high-tech tools of the trade that are situationally powerful, like deployable machines.

"We'll have cool combat deployables, like a turret, but we're not going to have anything that follows you around. You know, this is when you're out in the field and you need to hold one spot for a while," Matt continues. "There are defensive ones like a shield block that you can drop in the middle of the field, and other offense or defense-oriented ones like healing and ammo refill stations. Very handy."

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It's one thing to load up on sniper and hacker operatives, deployables, and big guns for highly-designed PVE missions and PVP combat maps, but what does an inquisitive spy bring to a non-combat cocktail party to avoid prying eyes? This is where The Agency's intriguing Alias system comes into play. The Alias system places a heavy emphasis on fashion and subterfuge, and certain outfits are essential to scouting out specific locations. Your designer suit and tie may look suave at the posh evening ball, yet it's all about deception and blending in, not impressing the ladies. Matt details: "The Alias system encourages players to collect lots of outfits suitable for different cases. Getting into a rough biker bar is going to take a completely different outfit than a high-class soiree at the Bergerbilder mansion estate. These outfits are part of a full Alias load-out with slots you can actively fill."

Like the thousands of possible combinations of combat outfits, your Alias kit comes with its own bag of tricks suitable for undercover sleuthing. "You can load a micro-camera for intel gathering, distraction systems like incapacitations and stuns, or abilities to flee. Everyone has access to Alias gear in their role, but you may also have awesome social operatives that can craft highly sought after Aliases, allowing you to specialize a bit. Like maybe you find that rare, amazing black tuxedo: a real collection piece that gets you into *all* the soirees," Matt tantalizes. Could you lend this legendary Alias tux to other players, so they can go deep undercover? "Absolutely, but maybe they won't lend it back to you! [Laughs] Have you played online?"

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System: Xbox360, PS3 | **Developer:** A2M | **Publisher:** Bethesda | **Available:** TBA

WET

Surprisingly, not slippery

words Matt Cabral

Rubi, WET's sexy gun-for-hire heroine, is all about style, but not tight-tops and short-shorts Lara Croft-like style. Oh, she's got the curves, and oh yes, they're held together nicely by revealing skintight, black leather, but she prefers to let her personality shine through her action rather than her assets. You see, Rubi is a stone cold killer whose skills behind her blades and bullets are only matched by her acrobatic prowess; the title adopts an absorbing '70s B-movie style—the developers cite Kill Bill and Desperado as influences—complete with a grainy filter and Tarantino shout-outs galore, that totally embrace Rubi's over-the-top moves. On solid ground she's a whirlwind of swinging katanas and dual-wielded pistols, but in the air, on walls, and even on ladders, she's so much more.

For starters, she possesses an amazing flip kick move that has her essentially climbing an enemy's chest, feet first, before kicking back from him and firing a hail of hot lead into his torso. She also pulls wall-climbs with Prince of Persia-like ease, and performs across-the-room knee-slides while capping baddies with a pistol grasped at the end of each outstretched arm. Performing these moves individually looks like a blast, but chaining them together seems to offer the biggest blockbuster-style bang for your buck.

While these early, acrobatically charged firefights had me recalling Kill Bill's best battle scenes—the game promises plenty of Crazy 8-like sequences—Rubi actually managed to one-up herself, pulling a feat of flexibility I thought only Aeon Flux was capable of; rather than climbing down ladders—you know, feet first?—Rubi straddles them with her legs, slides down while hanging upside down, and, of course, keeps those two pistol triggers working double-time. It's seeing this sort of thing in action that makes watching hands-off demos such torture, as you want to be the one clutching that gamepad, experiencing what it's like to empty clips into an alley full of goons while straddling a fire escape.

Rubi also likes to play in traffic; during a high-speed chase rail mission, she leaps from vehicle to vehicle—many flipping and exploding in her wake—via quick time event button presses. The mission appeared far more thrilling than the usual on-rails fare, and its cinematic complements made it more like an interactive version of a Michael Bay film sequence than a vanilla scripted event. If the actual gameplay and controls can match the stylized combat, pulp film paint job, and special effects-laden presentation, WET could blur the line between Hollywood blockbuster and videogame like no title before it. Hell, I almost expected the demo to conclude with "Coming Soon to a Theater Near You."

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It.
FELICIA DAY
Creator of THE GUILD
Co-Star of DR. HORRIBLE'S SING-ALONG BLOG

System: Xbox360, PS3, PC | **Developer:** Raven | **Publisher:** Activision | **Available:** Summer 2009

Wolfenstein

Welcome back B.J.

words Matt Cabral

At first glance, Activision's latest FPS—set in that bizarro alternate history populated by occult-loving Nazis—looked similar to any other WWII-themed first-person shooter. In fact, witnessing a gun-toting protagonist blast away at Axis forces in a rundown train yard totally stung me with a slightly disappointing sense of been-there-done-that. This familiar vibe was suddenly scrubbed away, though, when I realized the man behind the muzzle flashes was none other than B.J. Blazkowicz, and this seemingly me-too mission was anything but. After capping a few baddies as B.J., one of my NPC allies detonated a charge on a train car, releasing not only a screen full of eye-pleasing explosive effects, but a menacing blue mist that sent all remaining enemies floating towards the ceiling; we're not in Kansas, anymore. While this interest-piquing moment served primarily as a tease to the paranormal-powered things to come, it did make one thing perfectly clear: floating, flailing Nazis are easy targets.

A bit further into the mission—with suspended-Nazi target practice now feeling second nature—I was treated to another moment that'd be more at home in Hellboy's world than in Call of Duty's. Battling through a European war-torn village, B.J. encounters a hulking Veil Heavy Trooper who's lumbering cadence was compensated for by his expertise with a large projectile canon that disintegrated humans on contact. After playing a bit of cat-and-mouse with this more-machine-than-man adversary, I switched to veil mode—a helpful mystical ability that points the way to mission objectives and enemy weaknesses—and discovered the beast's shoulder armor was his Achilles heel. A few well-placed bursts from behind cover, and he hit the ground like a college freshman at his first frat party. Of course, this gave me the opportunity to snag his plasma cannon (the name does not do its screen-clearing power justice.) Unleashing the valve on this Nazi-melting hose reminded me of that scene at the end of Raiders of the Lost Ark, the one where faces were stripped away like rapidly melting candles. In fact, think of the plasma cannon's powers as that of the Ark's, only accelerated—sort of like the Lost Ark on a caffeine high.

> "Needless to say, they were toast—badly burnt toast—as their bodies disintegrated before my eyes."

Upon acquiring a weapon that'd make anything in Master Chief's arsenal look like a pea shooter, I was able to test it out, as a group of swastika-sporting unfriendlies barreled through a warehouse's double doors. Needless to say, they were toast—badly burnt toast—as their bodies disintegrated before my eyes. Despite a seemingly familiar start, Wolfenstein quickly ramped up to deliver all the paranormal, mutated-Nazi-charring action we've come to expect from the series. I look forward to hoisting the plasma cannon, again, and making more Nazi soup with it when the game storms consoles this summer.

BLACK WIDOW
BISHOUJO STATUE

1/8TH SCALE
APPROXIMATELY
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MARVEL X BISHOUJO

THE DEADLY (AND DELICIOUS) BLACK WIDOW WEARS A SKIN-TIGHT COSTUME THAT WOULD ONLY BE POSSIBLE IN THE WORLD OF ANIME AND MANGA. NATASHA ROMANOFF'S RENDITION IN JAPANESE BISHOUJO (TRANSLATION: PRETTY GIRL) STYLE HAS BEEN CREATED BY THE MASTER OF GOOD-GIRL ILLUSTRATION SHUNYA YAMASHITA AND WONDERFULLY SCULPTED BY YU ISHII.

THIS NEW VERSION OF BLACK WIDOW HAS BEEN SPECIALLY DESIGNED FOR SAN DIEGO COMIC-CON WITH BRAND NEW BLONDE BOB CUT, JACKET, AND BELT.

SAN DIEGO COMIC CON INTERNATIONAL

MARVEL UNIVERSE

CRAFTSMANSHIP KOTOBUKIYA

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System: PS3 | **Developer:** Q-Games | **Publisher:** Sony | **Available:** TBA

Pixel Junk #4 (working title)

Pile on the love

words Evan Shamoon

The premise of the final entry in developer Q-Games' four-part PixelJunk series will be immediately familiar to anyone who has been in the same room as a videogame in the past 30 years. Allow us to explain: the game takes places in a series of abstracted caves, made up of such videogame-friendly elements as lava, water, and rock. The players pilots a subterranean vehicle through these environments and rescues the eminently rescue-friendly "little dudes" scattered about to progress. You know the drill.

But here's the rub: each stage is a complex material simulation, whereby the player must affect the various forms of matter throughout the caves to make his or her way through it. Water and lava can be re-routed, and solid matter like rock and earth can be moved, exploded, or otherwise manipulated to the player's benefit. Different combinations will engender different conditions: spray enough water at lava to allow it to cool into a solid mass, or burn off part of a cliff face with a steady stream of the lava itself. Oh, and for those who never met an enemy they didn't love to hate: there are monsters.

Like the other games in the series, "#4" (the developer is currently holding an online contest with fans to determine the final name) needs to be seen to be appreciated. As with previous titles from the Kyoto-based developer, visuals are pure 2D bliss, with a fluid, organic feel that immediately and lovingly recalls classic Japanese game design. The mechanic of rescuing stranded miners involves firing an elastic grappling hook and snapping them (as well as monsters, objects, switches, etc) up into your ship. Finally, your craft is susceptible to extreme heat, so the player must mind the lava: if the craft becomes too hot, plunging into the nearest water source will help bring it back to a safe operating temperature. Remember: this does not apply to your PS3, even after 72 hours of continuous use.

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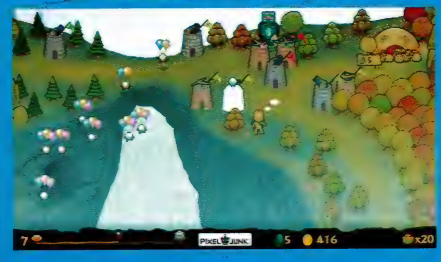
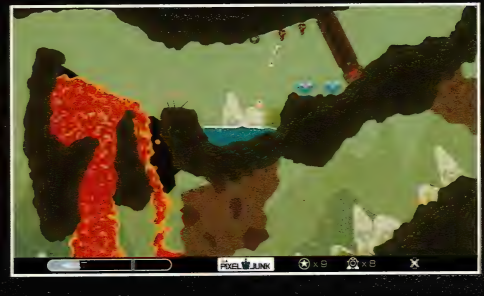
PixelJunk Monsters PSP

Developer: Q-Games / Publisher: Sony

Also out of Q-Games this month comes news that *PixelJunk Monsters Deluxe* is on its way to the PSP for release in the fall of this year. Including both the original as well as the *Monsters Encore* add-on pack, the critically-acclaimed tower defense game will include every feature and of the PS3 iteration, along with a new island (more than 10 stages), new towers, new enemies, and additional music from Japan's Otograph. Co-op will be available either online or locally, and a medal system will make for plenty of bonus features to uncover for you, the master of unlocking.





#1
OF A
BRAND
NEW
SERIES!
WILLIAM SHATNER
PRESENTS
THE TEK WAR
CHRONICLES
BLUEWATER
COMICS
LEGENDS ARE BORN.
COMING
JUNE '09
BLUEWATERPROD.COM

System: PS3 | **Developer:** Zipper Interactive | **Publisher:** SCEA | **ESRB:** 256-player battles | **Available:** Fall

MAG

words Mike Griffin

If you're the type of online shooter player that only casually takes part, low on commitment, scarcely motivated enough for high scores or proper organization, just in it for shits and giggles, really, MAG might an insurmountably intimidating experience. This 256-player FPS is hardcore to the gills, a roiling sea of skill and swagger. After 13 years of multiplayer experience, moving over 10 million Socom games, one can't expect Zipper Interactive to simply maintain the status quo (it helped to establish) when transitioning to PS3. In fact, through MAG and the maturing console's raging horsepower, Zipper, co-founded by military sim developers, may finally have achieved its ultimate vision of massive, unforgiving global warfare.

The game remains massive, but the *Massive Action Game* acronym has been dropped (it's just MAG now, like the recent trend of all-caps titles), and one-time subtitle "The Shadow War" is now relegated to the game's lore, describing the not-so-covert combat that follows a catastrophic economic and resource downturn about a dozen years from now—when governments enlist huge corporations to field elite private armies. It's kind of worrying that so many developers (employing so many smart people) envision the collapse of modern society and a theatre of privately-funded war in the next decade. In any case, you must choose a side in this future conflict: Valor, the traditional camouflaged, hard-nosed ex-military mercs, Sver (pronounced like, "to *sever* the enemy's jugular"), MAG's wild and aggressive orange-hued junkyard dogs, and Raven, a sleek, jet black high-tech fighting force.

Here is a case where there was predictive validity of MAG's potential to deliver, but to finally see and play the game in action at Zipper's HQ was nothing short of a revelation. The combat is something you could compare to the actual Black Hawk Down confrontation, where 120 people were on the field of battle coordinating movement and seizing essential landmarks. MAG is remarkably hectic and intense, even in smaller exchanges like the 128-player skirmish I witnessed in one map, a beautifully disheveled Panama City military base. Once you get past the raw technical spectacle of this proprietary engine and scoop your jaw off the ground, it's the maelstrom of movement and coordination that begins to dazzle. 256 must be ridiculous.

The key to making these blockbuster battles digestible is MAG's player unit system, broken into 8-man squads and 32-man platoons in armies of up to 128 soldiers per side. Four platoon leaders will disseminate information to their squads from one supreme, lead officer. OK, so you're thinking: How in the world are they going to get 128 varyingly-mannered people on the internets to perk up and cooperate with squad commands in a motivated, cohesive fashion? With the irresistible temptation of missions, XP gain, and a leveling system that unlocks epic carpet bombing A-10 strikes.

Method to the madness: FRAGO

There's never been a team shooter of MAG's scope before, and there's also never been a command system this complex (or rewarding). Leaders in MAG are like the NPCs in online games that give you missions, except these are real people, and bullets are whizzing by your head on the battlefield as you take on each assignment. Completing these FRAGOs (Fragmentary Orders) nets you XP, and XP contributes to raising your operative's persistent rank. In turn, the higher the rank you are, the better potential leader you make, because ranks open leadership abilities and tactical support for squad and platoon leaders, and the OIC (Officer in Charge) also earns powerful strategic maneuvers. Let's move this stuff into an action context.

Put yourself in a Raven squad leader's boots on the Kennicott Mine map, a sprawling chunk of contested Alaskan territory. Up to sixteen squad leaders will take charge of the seven operatives in their unit. Depending on rank, you can offer your boys instant abilities on the ground: Rapid Fire lowers reload times, Move with a Purpose increases base movement speed, Shallow

"...to finally see and play the game in action at Zipper's HQ was nothing short of a revelation."

A busy skirmish breaks out as Valor forces close in on a Raven-controlled helicopter drop point. These intense exchanges also highlight MAG's outstanding sound design.

Breath increases resistance to gas weapons, and Stay With Me! delays bleeding out, giving a medic more time to raise incapacitated squadmates. These perks are especially helpful during a blistering street clash through the abandoned town below the mine, and every small victory leading up to this point has been a FRAGO assignment that awarded XP. A squad leader will also draw upon tactical support abilities, like UAV surveillance drones, UAV cluster bombs, and targeted mortar and artillery barrages.

Meanwhile, as the platoon leader feeds you orders from the lead officer, he's drawing upon his own earned abilities—many of which benefit recon-style frontline operatives. Cut the Blue Wire increases explosives disarm speed, Improvisation repairs nearby vehicles and bunkers, Focused Hearing lets you detect enemy gunfire from afar, and Battle Hardened improves an operative's resistance to explosives. With his extra credentials, the platoon leader's tactical support abilities are more glamorous than a squad leader's. He can order aircraft strikes like the Bunker Buster or a punishing multi-pass Strafing Run, activate Gas Bombardment mortar batteries, and ping a Sensor Sweep to reveal all foes near key defender emplacements. If you're having trouble escorting an APC through a blockade objective, for example, and even the grenades and rocket launchers of assault operatives aren't making a dent, it's often a platoon leader that forcibly clears the path.

This leads us to the maestro of this command chain, the Officer in Charge. He's the guy formulating the overall battle plan, on-the-fly, for 255 other humans. The OIC needs subterfuge, durability, and recovery to stay in the thick of it, respectively bestowed by the earned leadership abilities of Silent Step, Take the Pain, and First Aid. The OIC sows the seeds of chaos in Domination maps with his unique strategic maneuvers: jamming radars with his unique strategic maneuvers: jamming radars to prevent tactical strikes, glitching comm channels to disrupt enemy voice chat (awesome!), full battlefield enemy location sweeps, and abilities that delay the enemy's respawn timers and improve your own. MAG's helpful 3D overhead map highlights particular objectives in play, allowing the OIC to monitor each hot zone.

Know your role

You'll never be a lone wolf in MAG (when you can convert your PSN friends list into a personal squad, who would?), but when it's just you, the reticule, and streams of hot led in the fury of a 1-on-1 moment, MAG does not disappoint. The action feels great, and class load-outs fulfill their destiny. Snipers can mercilessly pick off players as they para-drop into spawn points, mid-flight. Medics use proximity sprays to heal and can resurrect the fallen in a flash (to full health, no less), awarding a healthy amount of XP. Engineer-style load-outs are rewarded similarly for repairing key bunkers. Stealth players will flank and slice open the unwary with a combat knife. My favorite, the tank-busting heavy assault load-out, rolls into his XP and ranks on the frontline, eating bullets for breakfast and positively shitting them out of his angry, high-caliber MG. Play to the strengths of your class and you'll also earn Ribbons, which, in addition to a host of PSN Trophies, rounds out MAG's rich achievement systems.

The Cell bombshell

"Oh my god, the minute we started pushing the dev guys to put more stuff on the Cell's SPU, it's amazing how much MAG's frame rate boosted. All of the sudden I could put all my artwork in," explains Russ Phillips, the studio art director at Zipper Interactive. "The effects, particle system, all of the post-process you see in MAG—it's all SPU. Lets us put a lot more stuff in a level. It's a life saver."

Russ is especially pleased with the texture work in MAG, a combination of multiple layers and decal passes that creates a decidedly gritty, industrial look. Combined with stunning lighting and an elaborate post-process that "pulls out the dirtiness" of the textures, a level correction technique that embellishes dark hues, and we see the establishment of the "MAG look." With huge particle explosions and towering smoke effects caking the battlefield, this slightly charred aesthetic fits right in.

Models look great, rarely sacrificing quality as one might expect. Player models, notably body armor, have layers of excellent detail. Even the more boxy vehicles like APCs have generously normal-mapped hubcaps and armor. There's clearly a miraculous LoD system at work here (Level of Detail: proximity-based detail management). Lesser rendering technology would have inferior 3D models and objects obnoxiously popping into existence everywhere in sight. It's very well masked in the MAG engine.

"We have a real good LoD system. We can have a ton of 3D elements, and whether they're low or high poly, we don't want to see any cheesy popping. I think it shows; those massive maps go on and on." Russ continues. "Another thing we really focused on was unifying each army's visual theme so they're immediately recognizable in the game at almost any distance. So even one or two pixels, if you see a bit of yellow in there, it's a Sver guy; if it's got green, that's Valor; pitch black, you know it's a Raven." Up close in first person view, the engine harnesses the Cell to stream in super high-res weapon and equipment models for the player's personal enjoyment, and the aesthetics of this lovely gunmetal had to meet the approval of Zipper's ex-military men. I only play a soldier on TV, but even I could see the professional care: MAG's impressive weapons and devices of war looked fantastic in my polygonal Kevlar gloves.

MAG players will be able to see a good half-kilometer into the distance of any given map, a design choice based on gameplay iteration, not revealing *too* much of the field to the player, as opposed to a frame rate issue (it's 30fps @ 720p/1080i, incidentally). The unlocking of the SPU has long since resolved performance problems, so now it's on to building. "We have a small percentage of our levels wrapped up, but we know what we have to work with now, our tools are great, and we know where the rest of the levels need to go," Russ extols, eyes on the prize. "We're going to get the beta going, make sure they all play well, that people enjoy them, period—whatever it takes."

Mention of MAG's forthcoming beta brings testing to mind. Even with Sony's resources, internally testing a 256-player shooter must be a colossal undertaking. Realistically, how often does Zipper get to do it? "It's kind of funny. Every Friday we have a full 256 playtest here at Zipper, right. Literally an entire group from Sony down south will get on with us so we can get 256 players in the map, and we're going at it on the server. Man, this place totally shuts down. It goes quiet. [Laughs] Besides the people yelling through the halls, 'Goddamn!'—getting hit, getting sniped. It's so much fun to see it come together."

Indeed, it was quite a relief to see MAG coming together so well. I walked out of Zipper thinking, "Oh yeah, I'll play that." I can already see myself, several months from now (TBD, but possibly around Thanksgiving), diving into the game upon release. The depth and potential for long term satisfaction is already there, and the incredible spectacle of this massive war is undeniable.

Xbox Live Arcade

Spring Preview

words Eric L. Patterson

Recently, Microsoft had a special press event in Japan, both to celebrate the Xbox 360 selling one million units in the country and to give a "Spring Preview" of some of the upcoming titles the console would be receiving. By far the most exciting part of this preview was the numerous announcements made for what we'll be able to expect from the Xbox Live Arcade this year and beyond. So, here's a quick rundown of the highlights of the XBLA portion of the event.

Square Enix

*0 Day Attack on Earth

When you think of the Xbox Live Arcade, is Square Enix a name that comes quickly to mind? Probably not, but that may be changing if the company has anything to say about it. The folks at Square Enix have a number of titles in the works, and in addition to an XBLA port of their popular puzzle game **Yosumin. Live**, as well as the Final Fantasy-based "tower defense" style strategy game **Crystal Defenders**, they'll also be bringing us **0 Day Attack on Earth** and **Project CUBE**. 0 Day will be a fast-paced overhead shooter that supports up to four players at once, while Project CUBE—from what we've been able to decipher from the rather interesting preview video—looks to be a very stylish (not to mention just a little bloody) action-shooter.

*Project CUBE

Taito

*Bubble Bobble Neo

Taito is committed to bringing many of their beloved franchises to XBLA, as in addition to the already-announced **Space Invaders Extreme** and **Arkanoid Live**, Xbox 360 owners will get their own version of the remake of Bub and Bob's first adventures. **Bubble Bobble Neo** will not only feature an update to the arcade classic, but also the all-new four-player Arranged Mode.

SNK Playmore

*Garou: Mark of the Wolves

SNK fans everywhere were no doubt squealing like schoolgirls after the event, as SNK Playmore served up a few tasty surprises. Not only do we still have the upcoming XBLA version of **The King of Fighters '98 Ultimate Match** to look forward to (and not next year, as some were thinking), but we'll now also be getting the beloved **Garou: Mark of the Wolves** later this summer and **The King of Fighters '02 Ultimate Match** next year. SNK Playmore then had one more announcement that came as quite a shock: **King of Fighters Sky Stage**, a never-before-seen vertical shooter where classic KOF characters fly through the sky shooting down some manner of opponents that have yet to be revealed. Seeing screenshots of Kyo and Athena traversing the clouds unleashing a spray of bullets is something no man can easily forget.

Arc System Works

*0-D Beat Drop

Not wanting to be left out of the fun was Arc System Works, who later this summer will offer up **0-D Beat Drop**: a new puzzle game that has a heavy focus on rhythm and music, and which also looks to make extensive use of Xbox Avatars.

Dave Halverson
PUBLISHER

Modus Operandi: It's time publishers started listening to their customers and less to number crunchers. Most gamers prefer single-player games where the money goes into the core game, not unnecessary multi-player. There are plenty of games out there designed for that, so why do publishers feel compelled to cram co-op into genres that clearly don't benefit from it? When a game like de Blob—a pure as the driven goop original single-player action game with no artificial ingredients—can move 250k+ copies, and a hand-drawn 2D Wario is outselling the likes of a "broad" user behemoth like Banjo Kazooie N&B. I think the people have spoken.
Brain Drain: inFAMOUS and Bionic Commando hitting in the same month; pinch me, hard! And we still have Muramasa, God of War III, and Bayonetta directly ahead...There's that little trade show too. I may check that out.
Game of the month: inFAMOUS/Bionic Commando

Brady Fiechter
EDITOR IN CHIEF

Modus Operandi: There is no checklist for reviewing a game. The best game feels right from the start, and the best game is not concerned with feature sets as much as how each component is handled. If the visual space is not compelling in some way, the gameplay better be so good that it's Tetris (which offers an incredibly interesting visual space).
Brain Drain: Everyone should go to Disney Land at least once in their life. And every game designer who desires to create worlds should also give Fallout 3 a chance, study its greatness and learn from its clunky failures. Then take a break and go to Disney Land to think about it.
Game of the Month: Velvet Assassin

Greg Orlando
SENIOR EDITOR

Modus Operandi: Here's the way of it: a game can be fun, but not good, and good, but not fun. The two really are mutually exclusive; if it wasn't the case, Mutant League Football would score a 12 out of 10 and Silent Hill 2 would score a 4 out of 14. Thank god Play eliminated its scores. Also, Greg is counting the days until the installation of Reviewatron 4125, which will finally be able to suggest that fans of the genre should, in fact, like a particular game while all others should try before they buy—in 10 different languages!
Brain Drain: Dead Rising 2 may well be so awesome as to end world hunger. But please, Capcom, let's dispense with the horrible artificial intelligence for the non-player characters.
Game of the Month: Resident Evil 5 (Mercenaries)

Mike Griffin
PC EDITOR

Modus Operandi: I'm looking for convincing themes I can feel and considered polish I can respect, regardless of a game's scope or platform. I absolutely believe that games can be considered art, and a lot of great art requires a technical understanding of the canvas, instruments and stage. That's a balance I care about in a medium whose MO is interactivity. Interface is also very important to me...
Brain Drain: Real-time graphics are getting scary-good. Natural world detail in CryENGINE 3, the insane warfare in MAG, amazing animations in Heavy Rain's QTEs... That uncanny valley of game realism beckons. It's not intimidating. We'll always have great games that choose stylized and fantasy art too.
Game of the Month: Battlefield Heroes

Nick Des Barres
JAPAN EDITOR

Modus Operandi: Hideo Kojima may not agree with me, but I believe video games can be art. Although I have been writing about them for 14 years, never have I felt comfortable assigning numerical scores; there exist no universal, pan-human criteria against one can judge works of art. The most a critic can aspire to is describing, with as much eloquence as he can muster, how the work in question makes him feel. That is my goal when I review a game.
Brain Drain: So what's up with PS3 domination in Japan, huh? As I write this, the system has outsold Wii nine weeks in a row, and the one-two punch of Yakuza 3 and Resident Evil 5 has doubled the sales of every Wii game released in 2009 combined. Is this merely an anomalous, pre-Wii Sports Resort blip on the radar, or something more? I'm hoping for the latter.
Game of the Month: Final Fantasy XIII Trial Version

Casey Loe
ASSOCIATE EDITOR

Modus Operandi: I couldn't be happier that we've done away with review scores. It's ridiculous to believe that there's some objective standard of quality that covers the opinions of every person who plays games. That said, I will miss dishing out the 3.5s, because a good reaming just isn't the same without some arbitrarily low score at the end.
Brain Drain: The PSP may turn out to be the poster child for a slow-burning platform, with more major game announcements in its fourth year than the three preceding it. And with the PS3 getting a rare taste of mainstream success in Japan, the dark clouds that have always surrounded the platform seem to be clearing at last. Who needs new platforms when we have two sleeping tigers within our midst?
Game of the Month: Fallout 3 (catching up on the backlog)

Eric L. Patterson
ASSOCIATE EDITOR

Modus Operandi: I come from the angle that games can always be fixed and/or improved in some way, that games should be about making the player happy, not the developer, and if a game is multiplayer, it should be online, period. I'll forgive a game's flaws if it is an enjoyable experience, but I wish the small user-centered details weren't so often overlooked.
Brain Drain: The past few days have been a mix of Megami Tensei, Vocaloid music (esp. Luka), and Josou Paradise; I'm not sure even my anime otakudom years and years ago saw me as obsessed with as many niche elements of Japanese culture as I am right now. I need to go to Hooters, drink beer and watch boxing to re-balance myself out.
Game of the Month: Devil Summoner 2

Heather Campbell
ASSOCIATE EDITOR

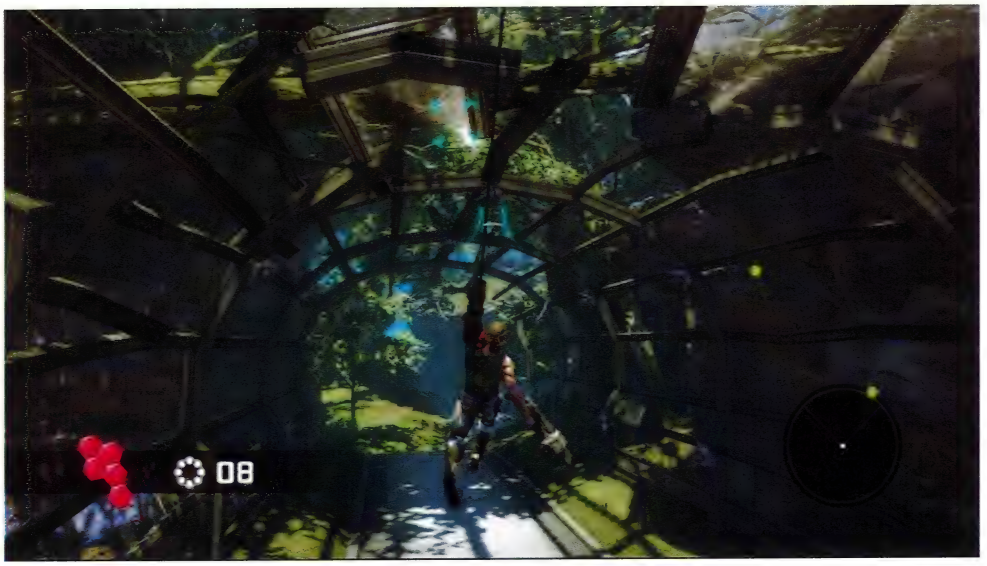
Modus Operandi: Games are a journey, and should be covered like travel journalism. It's more important to know how a game affects you than to provide a list of options it features on its menu screen. The number of guns, the types of vehicles, the variety of locations—these are bullet points for the back of the box. I'll tell you if it made me feel.
Brain Drain: Would it be ridiculous to suggest that game companies should release one player versions of games for a lower price point? The Xbox comes in cheap, stripped down versions; why can't games? Perfect Dark for the N64 had less features for less money, so I know there's a precedent (I've had PD64 on the brain lately). What I'm thinking here is that I'd love a solo campaign version of Uncharted 2 that was cheaper than the full, online, versus edition. Anyone?
Game of the Month: Street Fighter IV – Championship Edition

System: PS3, 360 | Developer: GRIN | Publisher: Capcom | ESRB: M | Available: May 19

Bionic Commando

Latch onto perfection

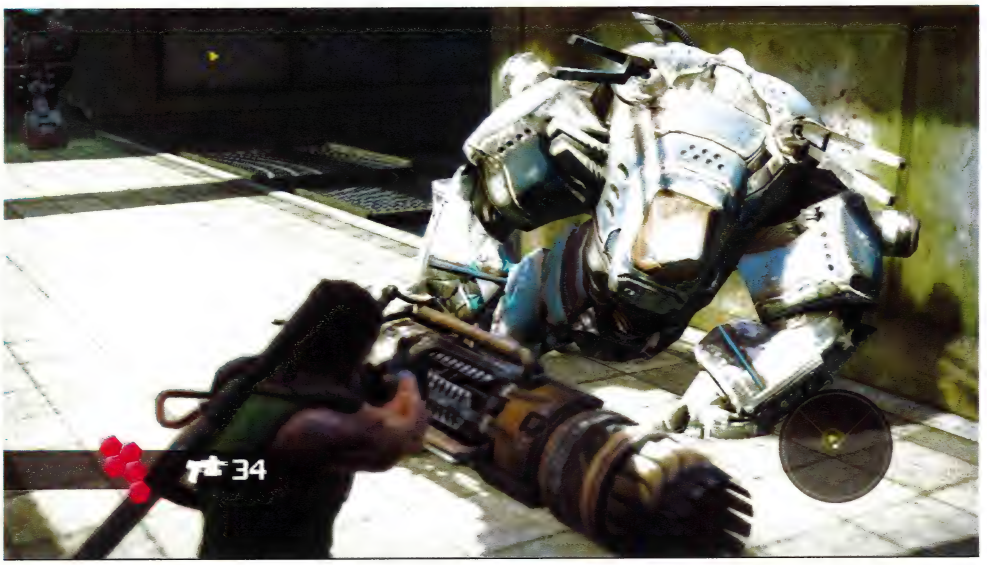
words Dave Halverson

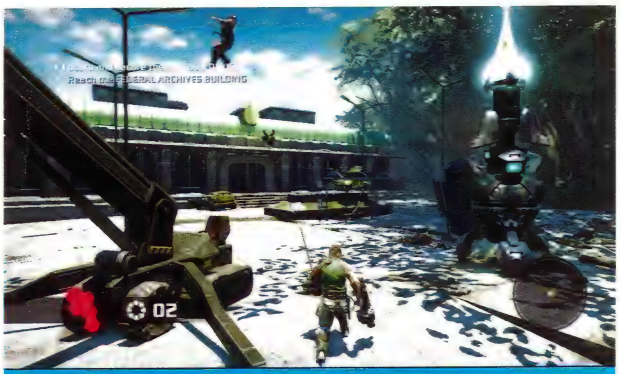


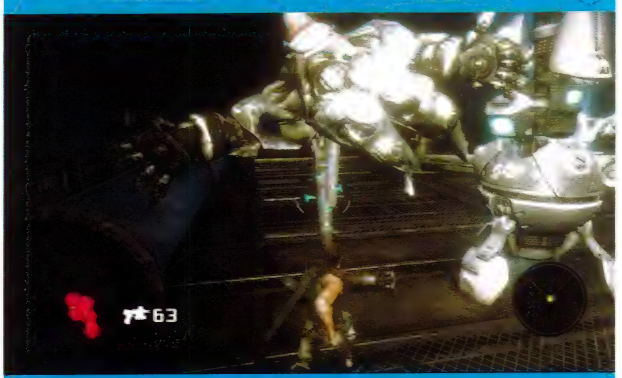
Aside from the requisite maintenance necessary to keep oneself upright and animate like sleeping, eating, drinking, and clean underwear, life as we know it can be broken down into two basic phases: discovering the things that make us happy (that's one) and then finding the easiest way to obtain them (that's two), so that we can do them as much and as often as possible. If you're reading this review, chances are that somewhere along the line you discovered the power of a great video game (hey, me too), plunging you into the never-ending pursuit of finding the next one that might return you to the exalted state of prolonged euphoria that drew you to a life of console cycles and loading screens in the first place. Welcome to the hamster wheel pal. Hey, you could do a lot worse. As addictions go circa 2009, video games are right up there with birthday-cake-flavored ice cream, sleeping in, and fondling the opposite sex. They're also legal, won't kill you and are relatively inexpensive. The only drawback is that the more games you play, the harder it gets to find your way back to that magic place. This is especially true for anyone who got started when horizontal running and punching (or shooting) was considered a major breakthrough. Mulling over the sea of NES flip cards at the local toy emporium, you didn't know what you were going to get, so when you came across a game like Bionic Commando, it was like you struck gold. That's why modern versions of games like Castlevania and Metroid seldom measure up, even though they're infinitely deeper, more polished games. It's not the original game they're up against; it's the memory of how that original made us feel at the time, and in 1988, Bionic Commando was nothing short of an 8-bit shot of straight adrenaline. Forget that the graphics and music were almost inconceivably cool; the grapple arm was like some otherworldly machination from a superior race. Sure, we've been begging for a sequel ever since, that's what we do, but it never even crossed my mind that the new Bionic Commando could do for me today what the NES game did for me 20 years ago. I expected a great game, but it never occurred to me that Grin could transplant the exhilaration I felt playing the original into open 3D landscapes. Mario Galaxy was a 10, but did it trump the pure ecstasy I felt playing Super Mario World? No. Metroid Prime was first-person perfection but did it hold a candle to Metroid or Super Metroid? Negative. The only sequels to classic NES games that have met or exceeded the splendor of the originals are The Legend of Zelda: Ocarina of Time, Final Fantasy VII, Ninja Gaiden, and Castlevania: Symphony of the Night. And then there were five…

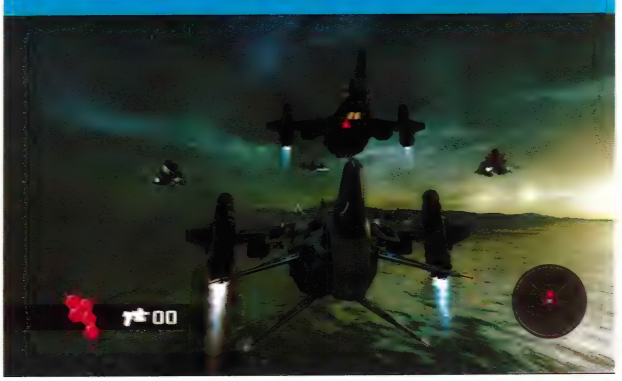
> "…it never even crossed my mind that the new Bionic Commando could do for me today what the NES game did for me 20 years ago."

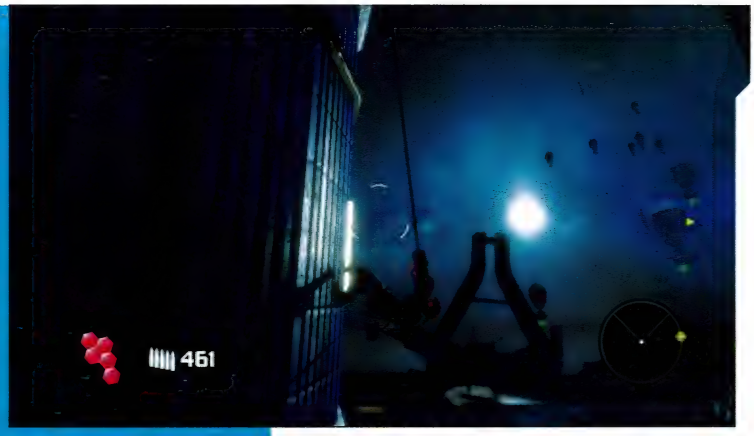
The people at Grin and Capcom who crafted Bionic Commando were put on this earth to do so; what they do from here is pure bonus material. It was Grin's love of the original game that ultimately landed them the gig in the first place—and they weren't kidding. First and foremost, outside of the technology on display (which is both vast and mind blowing) they have painstakingly evolved the grapple-arm mechanics to the extent that Nathan feels like he's hard-wired into your brain. The control configuration may seem foreign at first, but within minutes all you feel is exhilaration, power and most of all, freedom. So what if everyone's dead, I can fly through the air like a mad ape and survive plunges from hundreds of feet above the ground! Dang! Nathan Spencer is maybe the most fun to control 3D character I've ever had the pleasure of maneuvering. Only Cole from inFAMOUS compares. If Nathan can latch onto it (depicted by the reticule turning blue) he can attach, zip, climb, leap up or swing from it. That's where the fun begins. Nathan's bionic appendage evolves in league with the saga until he can grab onto, rip, or throw everything from cars to

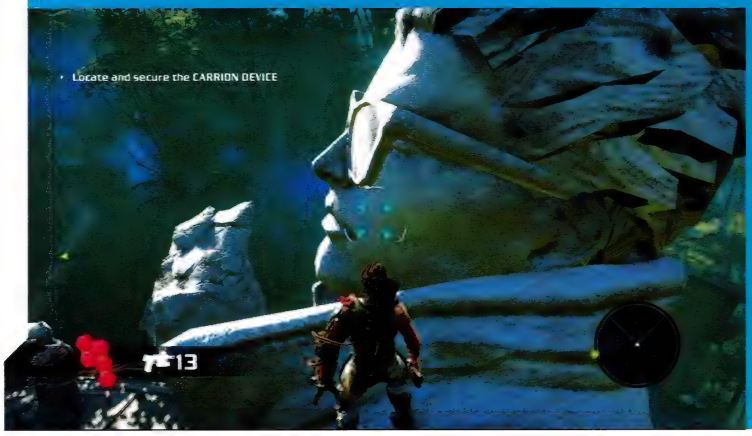


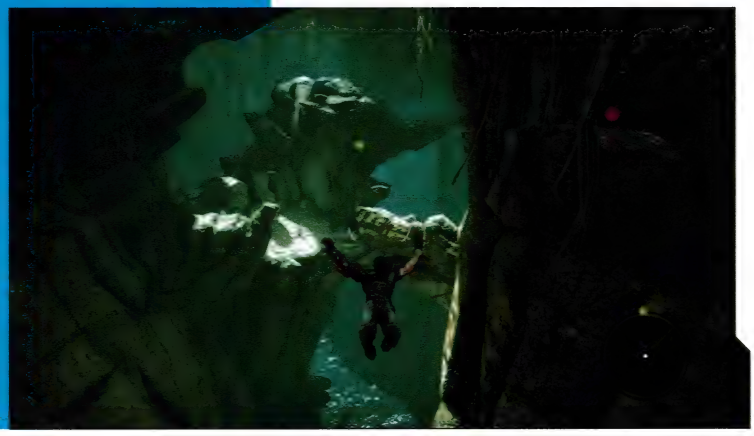












grunts, flipping them into the air like rag dolls to whip into ranged attackers or just to see how far they can fly. FSA supply drops provide special weapons such as the Bulldog grenade launcher and Yelena sniper rifle, but nothing says "right-back-at-cha!" like a screaming projectile grunt. They talk a lot of smack until they're mashing into the side of a building or being whipped into their BioReign buddies like a human torpedo. It's best to conserve your ammo anyway because the AI in Bionic Commando is like nothing you've ever experienced in three dimensions.

Each quadrant of Ascension City (what's left of it anyway) is teeming with BioReign grunts that, although easily disposed of, know how to flank their bionic party crasher and do so with extreme prejudice. You'll need to pick them off using the Tungsten (pistol) or via uppercut until you can hurl chunks of concrete, cars, or their buddies at them; but even then the tougher ones don't go quietly. The game's main adversaries, however, are Polycraft air units (fast and deadly but easily eliminated) and Biomechs—mechanized infantry suits that harness abilities akin to their post, from hover jets to tree-trunk-thick energy beams. Snipers are a serious threat too—I've never seen so many red beams in one place—but Biomechs are like no other virtual foe in the gaming canon. I've battled my share of enemies with a single weak spot on their backs, but these guys know that you know where the weak spot is. They won't be repeating any patterns for you to exploit. They go down relatively easily if you can nail them with a few Frag grenades, Hiker slugs or Bulldog rounds, but ammo is limited and in short supply. The only other way to kill a Biomech is by zip kicking (latch, zip, kick) or by hurling an object at its weak spot. But like I said… Depending on the type, Biomechs can take anywhere from a minute to five or more to bring down, depending on the environment you're in (you can run but you can't hide) and how well you wield Nathan.

And that's really what Bionic Commando is all about—strategically utilizing the environments by way

> "I've battled my share of enemies with a single weak spot on their backs, but these guys know that you know where the weak spot is."

of mastering the grappling techniques and weapons at Nathan's disposal. There's no way to trick the game and get by without mastering every nuance of the control and your environment, and believe me, you wouldn't want to. No words, trailer, or demo could possibly describe the utter perfection with which Grin and Capcom have sculpted this game. It simply couldn't be any better. The way they balance the gameplay elements between intense grappling and swinging sequences, skirmishes, sniping, and traversal is brilliant in its own right, but the way they underscore it with music as if they can see where you are is extraordinary. It doesn't hurt that Nathan feels alive. The way he negotiates rugged terrain, runs on girders, and jumps and balances on lofty perches is paramount to the overall feel of extreme realism amidst level design that is simply in a class by itself. Destruction has never looked so beautiful. That feeling we're all looking for…this game defines it. Some of the most magical moments are poking around after you've cleared a zone, or when Nathan is all alone in the hollow city or outskirts making his way across the broken landscape. The story, which unravels almost entirely on the fly, is also excellent and extremely well told via the ongoing squabbling between Nathan (played by Chris Patton), and "Super Joe" Gibson (played by Steven Jay Blum) along with Secretary of Defense Patrick Armstrong, Jayne Magdalene, a.k.a. MAG, and that cockroach of a terrorist, our old friend Gottfried Groeder. I was also very pleasantly surprised by the ending, and I'll leave it at that. You should skim over any story bits you might see elsewhere. This is one you don't want to see coming.

Grin has become a major player in console game development since they signed on Bionic Commando, delivering Wanted: Weapons of Fate and Terminator Salvation in the interim—smaller scale, less ambitious (and far less costly I'm sure) titles that don't hold a candle to Bionic Commando. Working with Capcom—namely Keiji Inafune (Executive Director) and Ben Judd (Capcom Producer) —obviously agrees with them. Between this and Bionic Commando Rearmed, it's certainly the most successful collaboration I've ever witnessed. With any luck Bionic Commandos sales will match its excellence and pave the way for repeat performances (online and console) with Capcom's equally (or even more) beloved Strider. In the meantime, feast your eyes, ears and mind on yet another quadruple-A Capcom masterpiece. Both versions (PS3 and 360) run silky smooth, and there's a good 30+ hours of gameplay (8-10 hours per difficulty setting) waiting to be explored along with some truly Bionic online multiplayer. I'd call that a mission very accomplished.

parting shot

Grin's Diesel engine is a big hairy slobbering beast. Bionic Commandois among the most advanced games of the 7th generation thus far. We're talking epic on a heretofore unseen scale. The gameplay is sheer perfection, the score is superb and the detail for a game this size is plain crazy. Nathan Spencer is a ballistic missile of muscle and might yet he controls with utter precision and between the level design and enemy AI, Grin puts us in the action and multiple moments of grandeur so well you can almost smell it. This is why you bought a 360 or PS3, right here.

Velvet Assassin

Addiction kills

words Brady Fiechter

Not your typical World War II.

Velvet Assassin is a game that builds its details around a nature of quietude—in its imagery, in its protagonist, in its ability to sneak up on you and crawl under your skin. Even when it loses focus and is overextended and rigid, there's too much to the experience that...

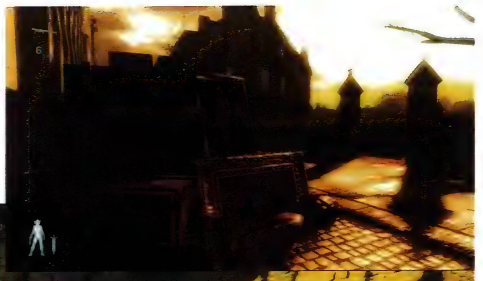
Let's halt that thought. A proper, filled out review was initially in place for Velvet Assassin, but unexpected events occurred that suggested a more spontaneous approach to my discussion of Velvet Assassin.

A friend of mine who makes games asked me what I think of Velvet Assassin, and I told him I was incredibly impressed by it—a cult classic in the making. But we discussed everything he thought he wouldn't like, then I balked: could I recommend Velvet Assassin on such a high level? Is it really that good? There were moments in the game of captivation and suspense, of spot-on gameplay notes and remarkable visual design. Here is a game that creates a period, a dreamscape, and I was in it.

We discussed: why not express what I experienced, put my loose feelings out there, and play the game through a second time and go for part two next month. Sounds good to me.

I entertain this approach because Velvet Assassin made me think about what I want out of a gaming experience. There are more sharply honed and louder games out there, but Velvet Assassin, in its tattered glory, is what I was captured by in subtle ways that deserve deeper exploration. It can't match the remarkable nuance of Metal Gear, or the depth of craft some people clamor for. The stealth mechanics are constrictingly linear, but the consistency of design is impressive and firmly engaging.

Assassin Violet Summers is quite lovely as gaming characters go. The reach for sex appeal is distracting in such a solemn and tragic world, but the bump starts to soften the further you play. This World War II figure is a surgical killer; it's guttural and effective guiding her into a kill, watching her pull the knife on a soldier.



Violet is only a small player in a vast world. The visual space is the real star of the show. And this is where I find the game a personal attraction. In an earlier mission in Paris, you are tasked with a boss hit, shotgun at the ready—this isn't all stealth—and to get to the target, you wind through a bell tower, its storied stained glass windows meeting you at the top. It's a fantastic sequence.

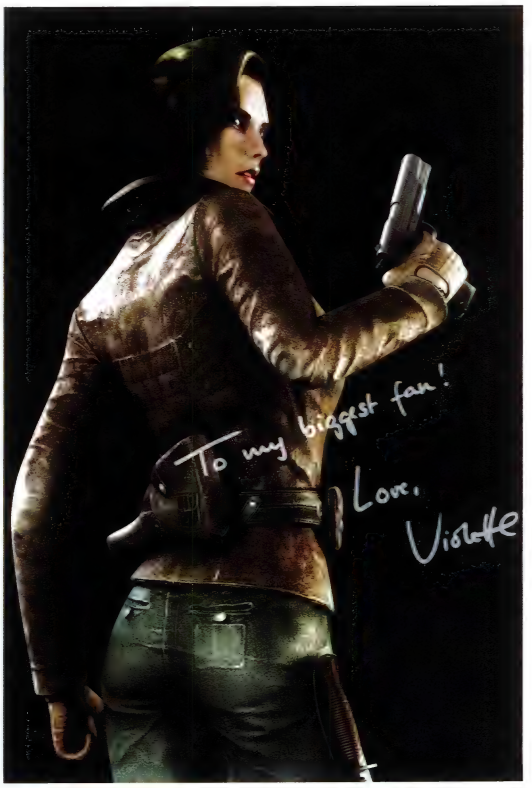
Here is where my friend calls me out. He argues, "Who wants to play in such a claustrophobic space? There's such limited gameplay potential there. I want more choices."

I want more games that follow the path of Velvet Assassin.

To be continued...

parting shot

Velvet Assassin's strengths are in its quiet, richly framed version of a World War II inside the head. The stealth mechanic is very specific and rigidly pattern based, but it presents its scenarios incredibly well.



System: Wii | **Developer:** Next Level Games | **Publisher:** Nintendo | **ESRB:** E | **Available:** May 18

Punch-out!!

Be like Mike

words Brady Fiechter

In the alternate reality known as Brady's World, I am a top-level executive at Nintendo, fully in charge of the green-light process behind every new Wii release. I declare that cherished NES and SNES games like Super Metroid, Castlevania, and Zelda all get remade. These aren't sequels; they contain the same core gameplay, same level structure, same nuts and bolts from top to bottom. The only component that undergoes substantial change is the visual design, which takes advantage of the depth of art and presentation that defines a modern game.

In the real world known as Earth, 2009, very little happens according to my wishes, but that's not to say the occasional treat doesn't come around now and again: the bygone masters at Nintendo have spun some nostalgic magic and surprise by entertaining my theory that a classic game from the NES/SNES era can indeed work spectacularly well by sprucing up the graphics and leaving everything else pretty much the way it was years ago.

Punch-Out!! for Wii will not be winning any awards for innovation, and there will be detractors who complain it's not enough of a sequel, a little too content to offer the same roster of characters and foundational mechanics from a series that is about as oldschool as games get. Whatever our measurement standards have become to judge a modern game a success or failure, it's important to remember that simplicity and pure fun always deserve a heavy spot on the scale. Punch-Out!! is a testament that good gameplay 20 years ago will be good gameplay today and 20 years from now. This is the most fun I've had with the Wii since Mario Galaxy.

The 17-year-old champion-in-training Little Mac is, of course, the puny boxer you take through the ranks, battling the likes of the snarling Bald Bull, the soda-gulping Soda Popinski, the effeminate ego of Super Macho Man—all delightfully colorful and snappy in their histrionic displays of personality. Attack patterns flow from the shape of their design: A sprightly Don Flamenco brings a dance flourish into his super attack as he spins in for a nasty punch; a morbidly obese King Hippo gets his big belly into the action. Exploiting weak spots gets you a cleaner knockout, and with good timing and the right combo rhythm, a good shot at just the right moment rewards you with a star super-punch.

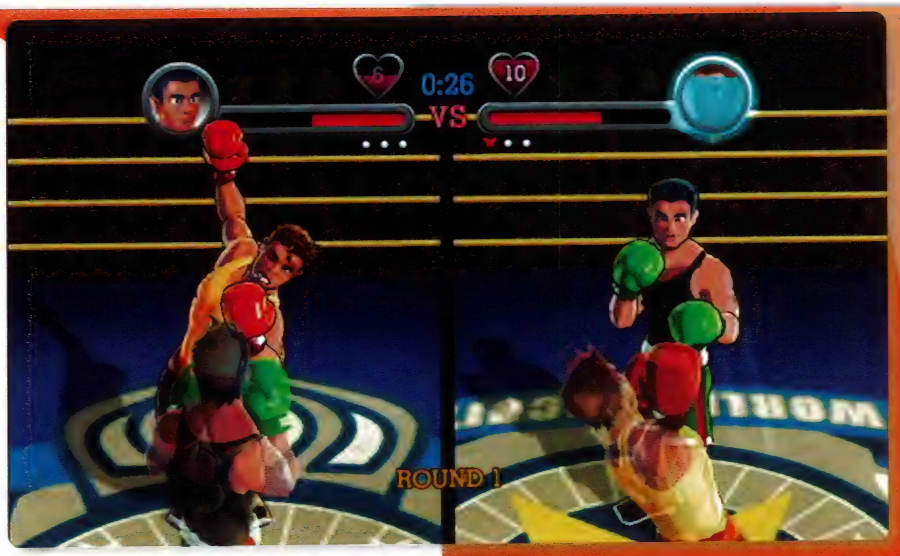
Forget the motion controls and go straight for the Wii Remote, turn it horizontally, and you've got the only way to play: right-left hook, right-left uppercut, up to block, down/right/left to dodge. Punch-out!! does not engage with a depth of play or complex strategy tree. It's all about dissecting manic patterns and reacting with just the right timing to exploit those patterns. You have to be lightning-quick and purely focused for the three-round bouts, recalling the reactive energy of an old 16-bit shooter. Getting into the zone of perfect timing, unleashing a string of punches followed by a star knockout is a hugely entertaining flow—what classically spun gameplay is all about.

Punch-Out!! could be viewed as shallow—there isn't that girth of play when you stand it against next-gen expectations. There often exists a push to view a game as a product as much as a core experience, which will get you in trouble if you're looking for that justified bullet-point of modes and extra goodies to satisfy your gaming palette. Punch-out!! works so well because it's so tightly executed within its elegant simplicity, a pixel-perfect control scheme that very few games adhere to. The replay is in the fun of pick-up-and-play—and an added remix mode that changes up fighting styles. But new or old, it's the kick of the coiled energy, fixed-screen gameplay that is in a league of its own in today's gaming.

"Punch-Out!! is a testament that good gameplay 20 years ago will be good gameplay today and 20 years from now."

parting shot

Complaints are already being waged that the game is too similar too the old series. This game wasn't meant for you. For the rest of us who desire an experience that isn't trying to be anything more than high-level throwback, Punch-Out!! is fantastic fun. This game is an unexpected treat and reason I still hold onto the value of the Wii...



Interview

Kensuke Tanabe, producer, NCL

Play [Mike Hobbs, Brady Fiechter, Daniel Campisi]: Was it your intention from the start to stay so faithful to the original Punch-Out!! design?
Tanabe: The motto we established at first was to faithfully follow the NES version, in order not to betray the many fans of the franchise. We and Next Level Games had agreed that opponent boxers would basically attack and be punched-out in the very same way as the NES version during the first play though of the game.

So little has changed in the core mechanics of this newest Punch-Out!!. What was the biggest reason you decided to remain so faithful to the original NES Punch Out?
The biggest reason here is not to betray traditional fans. Every experience will be new to those who do not know the original Punch-Out!!. We thought they would feel a fresh kind of fun in experiencing the new Punch-Out!!, just as new players feel when they play Super Mario for the first time.

Why make the decision to replace Mario as the ring referee?
We found Mario was not suitable for the atmosphere and artwork of the game. For your reference, even Nintendo employees face difficulty in securing authorization to use Mario's likeness in other titles from Miyamoto-san!

We like how you captured the flavor of the original game with the trainer's appearance in 3D.
We designed Doc Louis to be large and powerful, as he has a background as a heavyweight boxer. Also, we have designed him as a character that can't live without chocolate bars as an additional expressional characteristic. He encourages Mac kindly and strictly, like a real father.

Did Next Level Games approach Nintendo with the idea of making a new Punch-Out!! title, or did Nintendo approach Next Level Games after appreciating the quality of the Strikers games?
The fact is that Next Level Games approached us. We brought the offer and consulted with Miyamoto-san and Takeda-san who developed the original version. Finally we achieved authorization to create Punch-Out!! for Wii.

Many of the boxers, such as King Hippo, have the same or very similar fighting style and in turn can be beaten much the same way they were on the NES, while others like Don Flamenco are a bit different and more difficult to take down. Were you aiming for players to really have the feeling of playing the 8-bit NES game? How much did nostalgia factor into your decision making?
Our attitude with the game was to maintain the basis of the NES title as a remake rather than to let players enjoy nostalgia for its own sake. On the other hand, there are areas of this older title that we found needed mending, which we have adjusted through positive collaboration with Next Level Games.

What's your favorite style of control? Motion or classic?
Motion control, of course! The classic scheme gives players faster and more precise control, which makes it easier to beat opponents, but we prefer the intuitive and full, physical feeling you get through motion control. Once you get acclimated to motion controls, you can never go back to the classic style.

Did you have free reign when it came to character design? The game looks really nice.

> "Recent games tell us exactly what to do, where to go—everything necessary to complete the game."

As for characters, we designed them as faithfully as possible to the original version.

Punch-Out!! has a classic, pattern-based style of play... We think there's some really great value to this type of design that isn't utilized enough in modern design.
Recent games tell us exactly what to do, where to go; everything necessary to complete the game. Contrarily, the classical style of game design tends to let players discover the way to finish each challenge by themselves to finally have that pleasure of accomplishment. This time we are confident we have delivered this universal and fundamental pleasure of gameplay with the motion controls that are possible through the Wii Remote.

Why do you think so many classic Nintendo franchises have been explored throughout recent years, yet Punch-Out!! has taken so long to come back?
We had to consider what we could offer to make the experience fresh again. The possibilities offered by the Wii Remote were really the driving force behind the decision to create the game. We think that these years between the games were necessary to give us the opportunity to evaluate how we could instill this sense of freshness into the game.

Nintendo has proven a huge success with the Wii. Do you think modern game design is becoming too complex and losing focus on what made games great in the early years?
Yes, we both have the same understanding. Too much complexity may leave behind those who are new to games and cannot catch up the years of "evolution" that games have experienced. Nintendo aims to deliver entertainment to every kind of player and let them feel the pure fun of video games.

WWW.PLAYMAGAZINE.COM

System: PS2 | Developer: Atlus | Publisher: Atlus | Available: May 12, 2009

Atlus summons more life for the PS2.

Shin Megami Tensei

Devil Summoner 2

Raidou Kuzunoha vs. King Abaddon

words Eric L. Patterson

Devil Summoner: Raidou Kuzunoha vs. The Soulless Army was an interesting departure for Atlus and their Devil Summoner series. Coming from a company typically known for in-depth role-playing sagas, Soulless Army still had MegaTen-style RPG underpinnings, but then contained an action-oriented combat system and more adventure-esque exploration in a project that reminded me of what Square had attempted many years before with Parasite Eve. While not without faults, it was a fresh take on the series and held a lot of potential should Atlus see fit to give the idea another try.

Well, that's exactly what happened, as we are now receiving the English-language version of Soulless Army's sequel, Devil Summoner 2: Raidou Kuzunoha vs. King Abaddon. Picking up one year after the first game, we return to 1920s-era Japan, as the up-and-coming tamer of demons Raidou Kuzunoha the 14th is once again called to the Capital to help contain an uprising of the forces of darkness.

King Abaddon cemented two feelings inside of me; my unquestionable love for the Shin Megami Tensei world, and my original theory that Atlus had something special brewing in this departure from their safety genres. As a franchise that has been presented in different ways for countless years, it's amazing how engrossing and one-of-a-kind the MegaTen mythos still feels in King Abaddon, and being set against the backdrop of a period of Japanese history we Americans typically have little exposure to really set the stage for a story that held my interest right from the start.

As far as gameplay itself, it's clear that Atlus gave a lot of thought and consideration to all of the feedback it no doubt received after the launch of Soulless Army. The biggest complaints centered around the combat engine of the first game, and to help address those criticisms, Raidou now has a wider variety of offensive and defensive abilities, as well as the option to not only upgrade to better katanas, but also swap them out for completely different weapons. The idea of taking a demon partner into combat with you is still a prominent part of the game, but now you can team up with two different summons at once, providing for far more strategic possibilities due to the increase of available skills. Speaking of demons, perhaps the biggest change in King Abaddon is the return of demon negotiations; a change that will be interesting for more casual fans, but feels like a return home for us longtime MegaTen folks.

If you aren't one of those people, fear not; while King Abaddon is a sequel to the first game, it'll get you up to speed enough that prior knowledge of previous events aren't a requirement for full enjoyment.

"...it's amazing how engrossing and one-of-a-kind the MegaTen mythos still feels in King Abaddon..."

parting shot

A great mix of action, adventure, and RPG, all set in the weird and wonderful Megami Tensei world. MegaTen fans will appreciate all of the upgrades over the previous game, and new players will find yet another great, unique title for the unstoppable PlayStation 2.

It's been so long since my last trip to Japan that this is what I remember it looking like.

More enthralling combat makes for a much better game.

Sacred 2 Fallen Angel

A world of evil where nothing is sacred

words Matt Cabral

Hardcore RPG fans looking to hone their epic adventuring skills before Bioware's Dragon Age: Origins arrives, may want to give Sacred 2: Fallen Angel a spin. The under-the-radar release—a port of 2008's modest PC hit—lacks the polish, production values, and accessibility of a built-for-consoles role playing romp such as Fable II or even Too Human, but it still manages to scratch that looting and leveling itch fans of the genre crave.

It offers a sprawling world ripe for exploring, deep character customization, moral paths, village-dwelling NPCs and, of course, tons of beasts and baddies to thwart with a massive arsenal of upgradeable spells and weapons. Much of this by-the-book stuff works pretty well, too. The different character classes are a notable high point, offering a truly unique adventure depending on your choice; the six classes—high elf, temple guardian, dryad, inquisitor, seraphim, and shadow warrior—have access to their own weapon, gear, and spell types, and even have class-specific mounts. I started three separate games, with a trio of very different characters, and enjoyed a surprisingly varied adventure each time. Having to set your chosen adventurer on a light or dark path packs even more depth, and could ensure at least two playthroughs for 100-percent-completion obsessives.

A brimming selection of magic, ranged, and melee weapons keep Scared 2's combat interesting, too; its beyond bizarre narrative—a crazy-ass blend of high fantasy and sci-fi—serves as the perfect excuse to equip you with, well, pretty much anything. I tended to stick with Tolkien-esque staples such as swords and fiery spells, but at one point I'm pretty sure my elf was capping baddies with what appeared to be a plasma-emitting pistol. Fans of traditional fantasy fare won't be able to get behind some of this stuff, and might find themselves saying "Hey, you got your Too Human in my Diablo!", but if you find yourself not digging a particular weapon or quest, stick around, and Sacred 2's variety-soaked content should offer something that's more your style.

While the surface action and exploration makes a relatively seamless transition from PC to consoles, Sacred 2's mouse-and-keyboard roots rear their ugly head through clunky interfaces. There's lots of menus and text and complex-looking shenanigans that I found—as a console RPG fan—a bit intimidating. In fact, slogging through the headache-inducing menus made me feel guilty for ever criticizing Fable II's and Fallout 3 comparatively breezy interfaces.

Sacred 2 won't earn any awards at the end of the year and, actually, it's unlikely anyone will even remember it come December. But during a season that sees more movie license mediocrity than titles with much ambition or depth, RPG fans could do a lot worse while they wait for the next AAA time-siphon.

parting shot

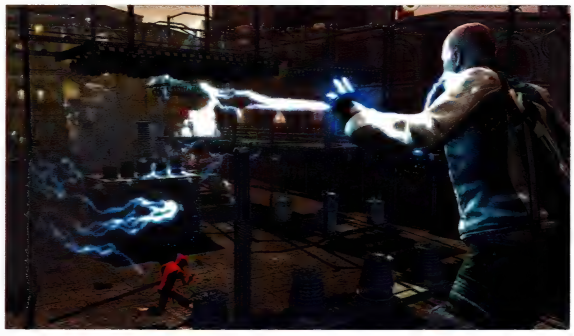
Fun combat, crazy depth, and varied character classes outshine clunky menus and complex interface issues. It's certainly no Fable or Fallout, but it does stand out in a season marked mostly by mindless action titles and furry critter-starring titles mirroring the summer's big screen blockbusters.

www.playmagazine.com

System: PS3 | **Developer:** Sucker Punch | **Publisher:** SCEA | **ESRB:** T | **Available:** May 26

inFAMOUS

Shocking



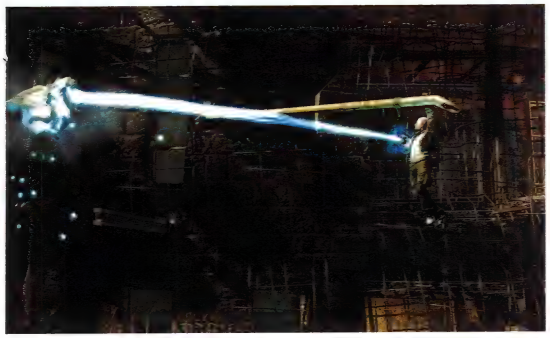
words Dave Halverson

As far as I'm concerned the fat lady was bound and gagged until Sucker Punch's first game hit the streets. Now the PS3 is officially launched. I was actually kind of dreading the day I'd finally play inFAMOUS, having thoroughly convinced myself that Sucker Punch had lost their minds the moment I laid eyes on the regular Joe that would follow in the footsteps of one of the most fun-to-control and charismatic characters to ever grace the widescreen—Sly Cooper. How do you top a suave raccoon that hangs out with a turtle and a hippopotamus? The last game in the Sly series came with custom red/blue glasses to play the special 3D levels. Do you have any idea how cool that is? How's a guy in a motorcycle jacket that shoots electricity out of his hands supposed to compete with that? I wouldn't care if I didn't absolutely love everything Sucker Punch touches, but I've been on the bandwagon since they revolutionized physics on the N64 with Rocket Robot on Wheels.

Oh me of little faith…The moment Cole hit the ground running, after a 100-or-so-foot plunge from the building he and his buddy Zeke call home, I knew that they had done it again. I didn't know exactly what "it" was yet, but whatever it was, it was gonna be great. First impressions are everything. Cole is super light on his feet, ultra responsive, and wiry as a cat. You immediately identify with him as a video game character. He may look like a regular Joe but his movement suggests something realistically unrealistic.

Running behind Zeke—who's chattering like he's overdosed on Monster Fuel—as we make our way to the city square to grab some groceries at the government food drop, people are freaking out; all the cars are crushed or gutted, and there's trash and debris everywhere. Empire City is in total disarray. It looks like Godzilla just left town. And it's all thanks to Cole. All we know at this

"By the time you cross the bridge linking the first two islands, you will be in complete and utter awe of what you've become, guaranteed..."



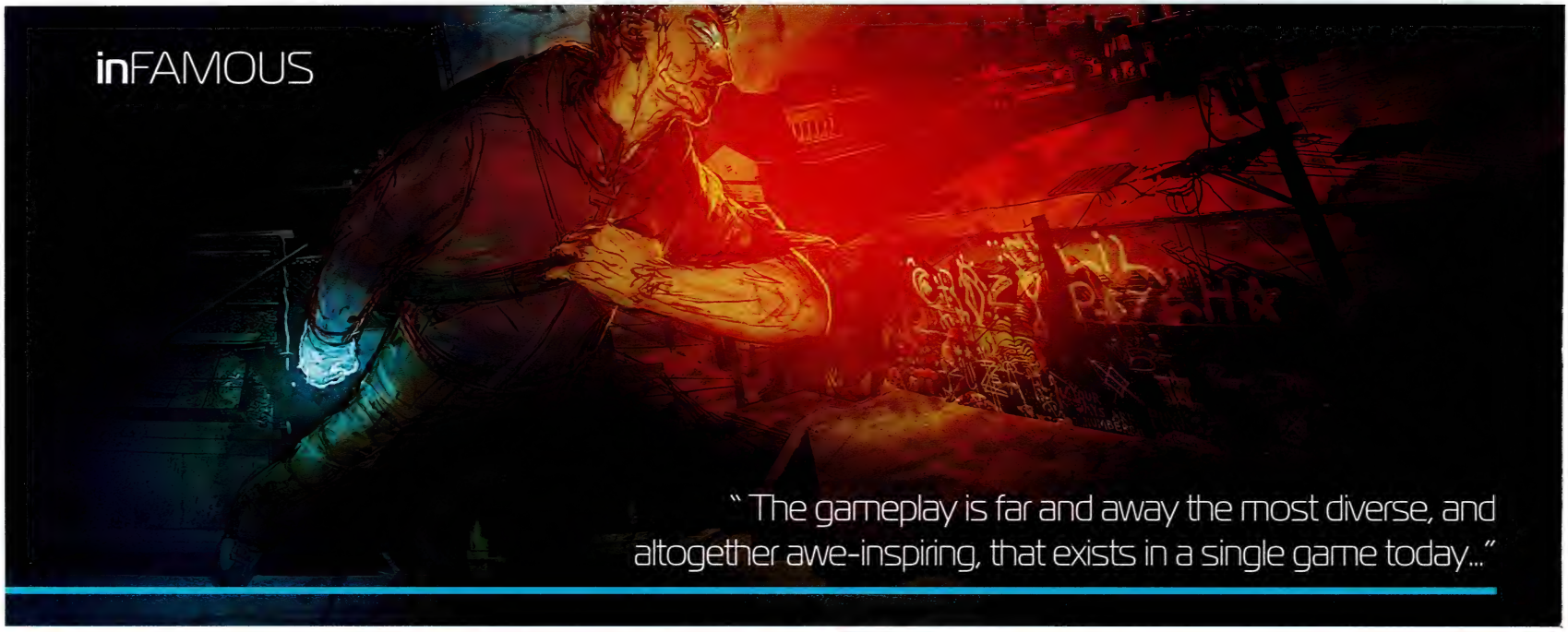
point is that approximately 13 days ago somebody gave him a package to deliver that went big-bada-boom with a vengeance sending out a shock wave that gutted the city, leaving inestimable casualties (including Cole's girlfriend's sister) and one supercharged anti-hero in its wake. When we meet Cole he can climb like a monkey, leap from any height and land unscathed, and fire lightning bolts out of his hands 3rd person-shooter-style, no gun necessary. When he runs low on power, recharging is as easy as draining the nearest energy source—fuse boxes, cars, phone booths, generators… as long as there's power to the grid, Cole's like an energy sponge.

The food drop sets the stage. Once Cole climbs the tower and zaps the crates loose he's presented with a choice; he can either zap a bystander, sending fear through the crowd so he can keep all the food for himself, Zeke, and Trish (leaving the weak to die), or let them eat their prunes and live to see another dreary day. Karma plays a big role in inFAMOUS, affecting the way Cole looks and in the way people look at Cole. At present, food or no food, they hate his guts (the propaganda machine is in full swing), so, time to go. But not before your first encounter with the Reapers— demonic hooded thugs that have taken control of the streets, killing anyone who stands in their way.

Cole wasn't the only one affected by the blast. Reapers don't have powers, but there's definitely something sub-human about them.

Blue markers on the map represent primary (story) missions, and yellow depict side missions, which in this case are just as important. For every side mission you complete you reclaim a parcel of the city, crime-free, causing the people to rebuild, and if you're being "good," worship you. They'll take your picture, plaster the region with your poster, and whenever someone is injured, beg you to use your Pulse Heal to revive them. I think I heard Zeke say I have a fan club… You'll also earn valuable XP used to unlock new skills. Certain skills can only be acquired with a particular Karma rank, so Cole's abilities reflect his demeanor. How you level up also depends on whether you're naughty or nice. The Shockwave sends out an electromagnetic wave that can flip cars like dominos (effective relief versus marauding hordes); Overload Burst

Cole behaving badly: You reap what you sow in inFAMOUS and the game adapts accordingly.



" The gameplay is far and away the most diverse, and altogether awe-inspiring, that exists in a single game today..."

fires a bolt of electricity that chains off of conductive surfaces to fry multiple goons; Shock Grenades let you hurl a ball of exploding energy; and Thunder Drop turns Cole into a human torpedo, but affects anyone in the blast radius. Cole scales poles and scurries up sides of buildings like an anthropoid; he can zip across power lines and rails on a bolt of lightning, use his hands as boosters to hover and even channel the final thoughts of the dead. By the time you cross the bridge linking the first two islands, you will be in complete and utter awe of what you've become, guaranteed; as long as the power's on. Juicing Cole is a tactic unto itself. When the city goes dark you can drain injured Reapers to replenish Cole's health with the eerily vampiric Bio-Leech, or if you're fully charged use Arc Restrain to pin them where they lay. Tapping L3, Cole can also send out a Radar Pulse to locate any nearby energy.

So, it's GTA on foot with super powers, right? Not even close. For the most part the missions in inFAMOUS are heated to say the least, and packed with tactical warfare, nimble acrobatics or both. The gameplay is far and away the most diverse, and altogether awe- inspiring, that exists in a single game today, open-world or otherwise. It has the precision of Sly Cooper (and the feel; if you've played Sly imagine that control, only better, in this world) and the look of a much smaller linear game. Infamous is textured and detailed better than the vast majority of big-budget games (name it, this beats it) and it's simply immense vertically as well as horizontally. That said, the textures are only the beginning, the architecture itself is really the star. The animated signage simply should not exist in a playground this size, and the shapes and facades of the buildings is so varied and inspired I simply don't have an expletive to do them justice. Each one is like a little piece of unique gameplay unto itself by design. The gameplay in infamous slaughters its competition, and believe me, you don't need a car.

Even outside of the missions, the game is in constant motion. Crossing enemy territory to reach the next waypoint is never easy. You're constantly using the world as a means of cover, stealth, and progression, leaping and hopping up the sides of buildings; hanging from any ledge to fire on attackers below or using the rooftops to leap, glide and hover into position or away from certain death. It's a total rush. Reapers don't have good AI, they have great AI. They attack in packs; some charge, some flank, some shoot from rooftops, some man turrets, some lob fire bombs… they might even arrive in trucks. Not with abandon of a typical NPC, but like they're homed in on your beacon. It's intense in a way I've never experienced. Sucker Punch are also known for their mastery of physics and once again, they've shown the way. There's no question that these are the best action-game physics to date. Jump from any high perch onto a vertical pipe and you'll begin to see what I mean. Climbing and building to building transfers are pure unbridled laugh-out-loud fun, and when you enter the sewers, well, say hello to your PS3 now. In fact, go ahead, give it a hug.

By the time you've taken on Sasha (one helluva French kisser) and graduated from Reapers to Dust Men (and other hulking monstrosities fashioned from junk), you'll begin to realize the scope of what you're into. Just prior, climb up to the top of the bridge before the engineer lowers it (once he's safe) and think about how far we've come. It's a very good time to be a gamer, even for a regular Joe.

parting shot

inFAMOUS is now in the running for my number-one favorite game (how can this and Bionic Commando hit in the same year, let alone month?) and it doesn't star a creature or a heroine. Hell must be frozen over. Sorry Sadam and Mr. Devil!

review | **System:** NDS | **Developer:** Graffiti Entertainment | **Publisher:** Archcraft | **ESRB:** E | **Available:** May

Black Sigil
Blade of the Exiled

Live by the sword...

words Dave Halverson

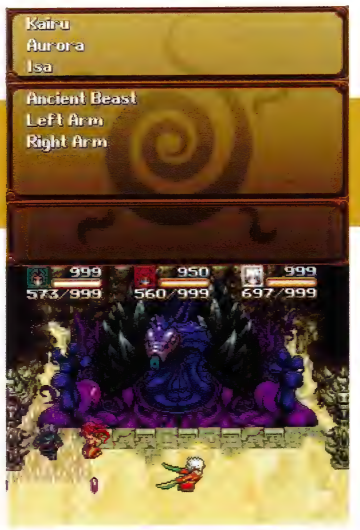
"...that's exactly what Black Sigil is: a superbly polished throwback RPG."

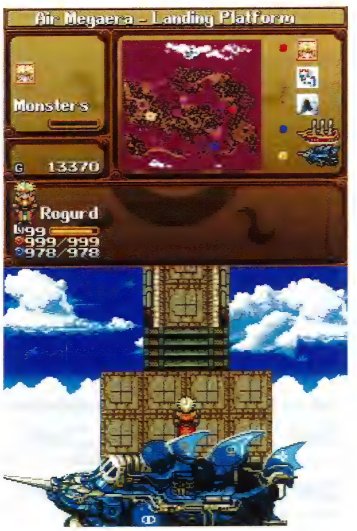
It's been twenty years since Duke Avery defeated High General Vai the Magicless and his Curse-Bringers and sealed them away in a tower north of the capitol. As Black Sigil gets underway, the region is still at peace, although the natives are getting restless as trouble seems to be brewing. You'd think they'd have figured it out by now; seals in RPGs never last.

Kairu was taken in by the Duke after his father died when he was just a little boy, and he's lived with the him and his daughter Aurora, a powerful magic user, ever since, training at Avery Manor where the Duke trains knights to serve the king of Bel Lenora. The call for worthy knights is on the rise in the region as the seal holding the evil Curse-Bringers is said to be weakening (see?). Kairu has grown into a worthy swordsman under the Duke's tutelage but tragically is unable to wield magic, and in Bel Lenora, the inability to wield magic is looked upon as the gravest evil since the last man unable to wield, General Vai, turned into a wicked war monger. Kairu is mocked by the other knights and treated like an outcast, which doesn't sit well with the Duke who looks upon him as a son.

As the game begins the Duke gets word that Kairu has finally been granted an audience with the Priests at the Spirit Temple and so off we go, stopping over in the capitol to pick up supplies the Duke has secured for the journey on the way. Heading out into the mode-7-like wilderness—your typical SNES style over world—Bel Lenora is less than a foot away from a practical vantage point, so expect to be stopped every inch to 2-inches or so for a brief exchange utilizing the games active tactical battle system, inputting simple item/attack commands via the d-pad for Kairu to carry out as the battle gauge fills and depletes.

Arriving at the Spirit Temple, Kairu is granted access to the scared crystal that "speaks" to anyone able to wield magic, but Kairu hears nothing and must return to the Duke with the bad news. With all hope for Kairu lost, Duke Avery sends him on a mission to clear an infested forest, however, as he departs Aurora insists on coming along to protect him (and she won't take no for an answer) and so away they go, together...





Arriving at the first massive crab-like boss, after a clever bit of maneuvering over an ice lake and through a gorgeously shrouded forest, Aurora is suddenly pulled away and the creature, which can only be affected by magic, strikes Kairu down. It was the Duke who pulled Aurora away, and she's furious. But Kairu knows—or thinks he knows—that the Duke was merely trying to draw the magic out of him, and all is forgiven. The following day the Duke asks Kairu to meet him at the cursed caves and it's there that the adventure really begins, as the Duke draws his sword and explains to Kairu that he has no other choice than to banish him into the darkness. Removing the seal, the Duke presents Kairu with a powerful sword handed down through the ages and then seals him away into the mountain. Kairu, realizing the Duke had no other choice, gracefully accepts his fate and...what's this? Aurora! She's ba-ack, and she's coming along—again!

As I'm playing Black Sigil I'm reminded of Lunar, Vay, Final Fantasy and every other RPG I adored during the 16-bit era, because that's exactly what Black Sigil is; a superbly polished throwback RPG consisting of gorgeous top-down regions separated by over world maps. As the hours melt away you'll encounter allies and enemies, bolster your party and equipment—and like in Lunar you can toggle party order and your lead character for different situations—sail away in air-ships and battle screen-filling monsters. All the while the SNES-era soundtrack pulls you in along with the amazingly detailed throbbing little spritelings that represent your characters. The hair flows, robes flap, eyes bug out... They're full of expression for such tiny little things, and the level design within each labyrinth, kingdom, and town are spectacularly constructed relative to the era they represent. Forests are thick and canopied, meadows and brooks flow and glisten, mountain passes are layered over deep parallax, and faux beams of light cascade through windows. It takes a couple of hours for everything to gel—the battles especially get better as you meet and cycle new characters into your party—but once it does, if it's old-school role playing you desire, you've come to the right place.

parting shot

Playing an old-school RPG is great with dual screens and Archcraft have seen to every last detail. The dialogue is first rate (talk to everybody; the maids, farmers...), the systems easy to assimilate, and the visuals are vibrant and painstakingly detailed. Great BGM too.

review | **System:** PSP | **Developer:** Stormregion | **Publisher:** Deep Silver | **Online:** NA | **ESRB:** T | **Available:** Now

Mytran Wars

Solid Gameplay Marred by Cutscene Cuteness

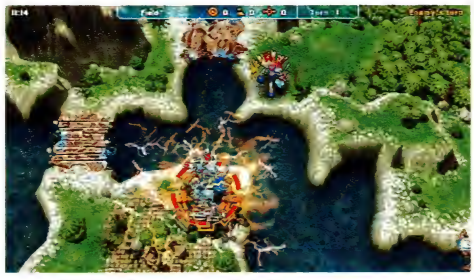
Mytran Wars is a competent, fun addition to the tactics pantheon. Unfortunately the story does not take itself seriously, the script is a collection of one-liners, and the cutscenes are badly illustrated, but these flaws recede into the background during gameplay.

The tech tree is sound and sleek; not a single useless mod clutters the selection. A host of customized mechs from a limited medium means more time in the field racking up kills and less time in the rear sifting through menus and gear. Through customization, small Intruder mechs become healers, buffers/debuffers, long-range recon, even suicide bombers; Destroyers can become snipers, close-combat gladiators, et cetera.

"Mytran Wars is a competent, fun addition to the tactics pantheon."

Forget the inept cutscenes and crap voice acting: the gameplay is fun, the in-game graphics are sharp, and the maps diverse. Plus there is a crazy array of secret material: Secret stages, secret map objectives, secret mech mods, even secret Hero units.

The soundscape is soft, multi-layered, ambient, comfortable with being in the background. It could be argued that speed metal and electro-industrial music would be better for a story of mech warfare, but Mytran Wars is a refinement of the genre, not a revolution. **Kyle Stiff**



parting shot

No boundaries are pushed, but no crippling mistakes are made. Still, I say we abandon the status quo and further distinguish Western games from their brightly-colored Eastern counterparts. For mechs, I prefer rust to shine, and crude oil to cold fusion.

preview | **System:** DS | **Developer:** Atlus | **Publisher:** Atlus | **ESRB:** Teen | **Multi:** 1 Player | **Available:** June 23, 2009

Shin Megami Tensei: Devil Survivor

It's super, thanks for asking

I've got a confession to make: the original announcement of Devil Survivor left me a bit cold. Talk had been brewing about a Shin Megami Tensei title coming to the DS, and my mind raced with thoughts of what Altus might have up their sleeve. I was somewhat let down to find out it would be a pseudo-SRPG, as that seems to be the trendy–and not exactly daring–choice to make lately when bringing franchises to the DS.

A couple hours into game, and I'm stating to have a change of heart, not to mention a small feeling of shame at not trusting the creative folks at Atlus Japan more than I did. Yes, there are some SRPG elements here, most specifically in the non-combat portions of battle, which unfold as units move around pre-defined grid-lined locals. Once you've positioned a character next to a foe, however, the game make a huge genre shift to a heavily RPG-styled interface that could have been ripped from any classic MegaTen title. It's a slightly crazy-sounding idea that, in practice, surprisingly works extremely well. When you aren't fighting against the demonic hordes that have invaded modern-day Tokyo, gameplay is centered around visiting various regions of the city, talking to NPCs, or bidding on new demons in an underworld auction house.

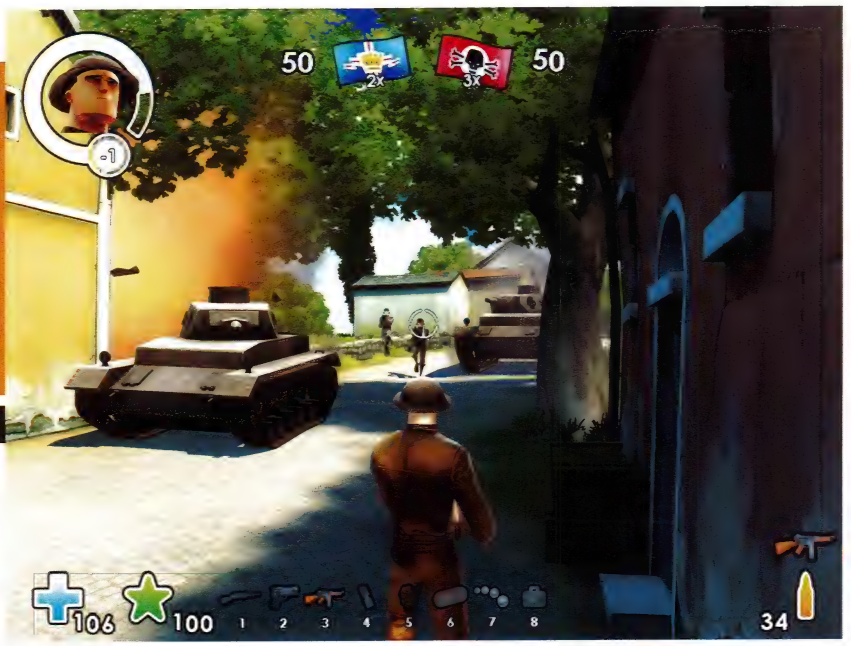
Devil Survivor holds the potential to be one of those nice surprises of the gaming world; those times when you don't get what you wanted, but instead get something you didn't know you wanted until you play it. **Eric L. Patterson**

"Devil Survivor holds the potential to be one of those nice surprises of the gaming world."

Battlefield Heroes

Cartoon chaos on the battlefield

words Mike Griffin



I can't shake Battlefield Heroes' main theme song from my mind, a whistled, high-spirited battle march that ends in the BF series' patented orchestral crescendo. I love DICE, so I admit coming into Heroes with a hint of bias. I sort of knew what scale I was going to be dealing with, with BFH arriving via the free-to-play route (revenues to be generated by a big cosmetic item shop), and clearly with its art style and themes it's not a hardcore military shooter. None of this precludes DICE from nailing that nebulous fun shooter feeling with confidence and polish. There's room for Battlefield Heroes.

I don't like to lean on the word, but "whimsical" certainly comes to mind when referencing Battlefield Heroes' style and relative violence levels. While BFH employs similar ultra-saturated fantasy hues as Team Fortress 2, you won't see showers of gibs in Heroes. It's all quite safe for the youngsters, and the straightforward shooter controls and third-person perspective make it extremely accessible to non-core shooter players. I'm a big kid, and one of these core gamer types, and I still had a blast playing the beta.

As you might have inferred at the mention of an item shop, Battlefield Heroes has you creating persistent characters that you can level up, power up, and play wardrobe manager with. I created several soldiers in each faction, the righteous Royal Army and evil National Army, kind of satirical approximations of Allied and German armies that fit into the game's alternate cartoon universe mash up of WW1 and 2. Three archetypes can be built up: the stealthy, sniping Commando, frontline tough guy Gunner, and the Soldier, your light infantry medic.

Besides the weapons, appearance items, and bandage and repair widgets you can purchase for your character (and you can always buy stuff using Valor Points, a gameplay-earned currency type), each class can level up and invest in skills. For a Gunner, you can give yourself stuff like short run boost power and concentrated MG burst fire. A soldier is going to build up his valuable area of effect healing. The Commando will naturally round out his sniping and stealth abilities. DICE grants access to these abilities early on during level progression (with XP earned through missions, victories and round performance), so it doesn't take long to develop an MMO-like bond with one's avatar.

Sure, the different guns, kits, and character abilities provide a healthy general increase in kill potential and survivability, but Battlefield Heroes is a shooter first and MMO-variant second, so your skill with a reticule is prime. XP for the round is awarded on-the-fly through kills, heals and flag captures, and you complete simple missions (usually Damage/Heal/Capture X amount in a round) for extra cash to spend in the shop.

The third-person action is crisp and tight, and the performance of the game is hyper-optimized thanks to relatively light world complexity, with an art style and perfect LoD system that lends the bright visuals a really solid feel. DICE has always done vehicles right, and the jeeps, tanks and planes in BFH are easy to control with well-tuned damage and durability. You can do wacky stuff like ride on the wing of a plane to provide the pilot some extra firepower, dropping TNT charges on enemy control points during strafing runs. Hop off the wing and parachute to safety whenever and wherever you like.

Battlefield Heroes is pretty much exactly what I expected of a lighter, cartoon shooter from DICE. The three maps I've played so far, Buccaneer Bay, Seaside Skirmish, and Victory Village each demonstrate the developer's proven map making talent. We still have to see how the whole micro-transaction thing pans out this summer when the item shop fills up (there's already some fun pirate and ninja-themed stuff), but even if you play for free, forever, BFH is still going to provide a quick, fun, stress-relieving laugh.

Play Online

Dungeon Fighter Online

Not content with enslaving millions of players in the enduring Maple Story, Nexon's wildly popular casual 2D MMO, the net gaming giant is preparing to unleash Dungeon Fighter Online to Western audiences, sure to inspire a hardcore 2D MMO crowd. Known as Dungeon & Fighter across Asia, DFO is heavily inspired by Capcom's series of fantasy-themed 2D arcade titles, most notably D&D: Shadow over Mystara. Players love this classic form of side-scrolling fantasy beat 'em up.

Dungeon Fighter Online is kind of like the Item Collection mode in D&D Collection for Saturn, but raised to a massively multiplayer scale of advancement and itemization. Like other MMOs, you'll get quests, slay creatures, gain levels and find loot in DFO, often in the company of party members. Those classically drawn 2D characters you see are actually complex RPG avatars, with five initial classes that can each specialize into several additional class types at higher levels. The character design is rather bad ass, and one of the reasons why the game did gangbusters in Asia—even spawning an anime series in Japan last month. DFO should be entering US beta later this summer, and it's rumored that Nexon may add full control pad support to this version. Please do.

Mabinogi Heroes

While Nexon America has not confirmed its intention to port Mabinogi Heroes to North America at the time of this writing, they'd be mad not to. Mabinogi Heroes resembles the original game only in name; this time around Nexon's devCAT studio has selected a mature fantasy world drawn in realistic proportions inside a pleasantly modified Source Engine. At this point it appears to be the Half-Life 2 Ep.1 version of Source, pre-Left 4 Dead enhancements, but we all know Episode 1 still looks outstanding. Mabinogi Heroes fuses the engine's power with an alluring Asian art style that's very easy on the eyes.

The game is a third-person hack-and-slash MMO experience that demonstrates some really appealing combat, animations and physics. Vicious instant hit combat rolls out like a 3D fighter, with big sword tracer flourishes and Soulcalibur-like player models decked-out in more armor detail than any recent fantasy MMO. Excellent real-time cinematics exploit Source for expressive faces and lip sync. It's the action itself, however, that I can't take my eyes off of. You've rarely seen this kind of wild interaction and physics destructibility in a MMO title. You can smash all manner of objects in the environment and grab posts, pillars, tombstones, plaques, branches, catapult spears, and more to launch at monsters. There are increasingly powerful grab and throw moves that let you pound enemies into each other and walls, and everywhere you look you see impressive destruction and gore as you and foes crash through the world to the din of satisfying combat sounds.

Mabinogi Heroes could actually pass for a AAA console title if you didn't know any better, with a level of sophistication that embarrasses most of its action-MMO brethren. And it has a lot of heart. Nexon America needs to port this. Might not be a bad idea to re-brand it for the West with a darker title.

"Mabinogi Heroes could actually pass for a AAA console title if you didn't know any better..."

NPD GROUP

OCZ Technology

June 2009

Top-Selling PC Titles For March 2009

01	Empire: Total War	Sega of America
02	World of Warcraft: Wrath of the Lich King	Activision Blizzard
03	The Sims 2 Double Deluxe	Electronic Arts
04	Warhammer 40,000: Dawn of War II	Relic/THQ
05	World Of Warcraft: Battle Chest	Activision Blizzard
06	World Of Warcraft	Activision Blizzard
07	The Sims 2: Apartment Life Expansion Pack	Electronic Arts
08	Spore	Electronic Arts
09	World of Warcraft: Burning Crusade	Activision Blizzard
10	Mystery Case Files: Return To Ravenhearst	Activision Blizzard

Spore

Empire: Total War

Blow your Tax Refund...On Affordable Gaming Components

Ahhh, the end of tax season, and the refunds are flowing! And who doesn't love a little extra money in their pocket? If you were waiting for the right time to make that critical upgrade, go ahead and enjoy the fruits of your labor by snagging that hardware you've been drooling over all year. After spending the year's paychecks on the boring necessities, it's time to indulge in one or all of these awesome tech toys with that extra wad of cash.

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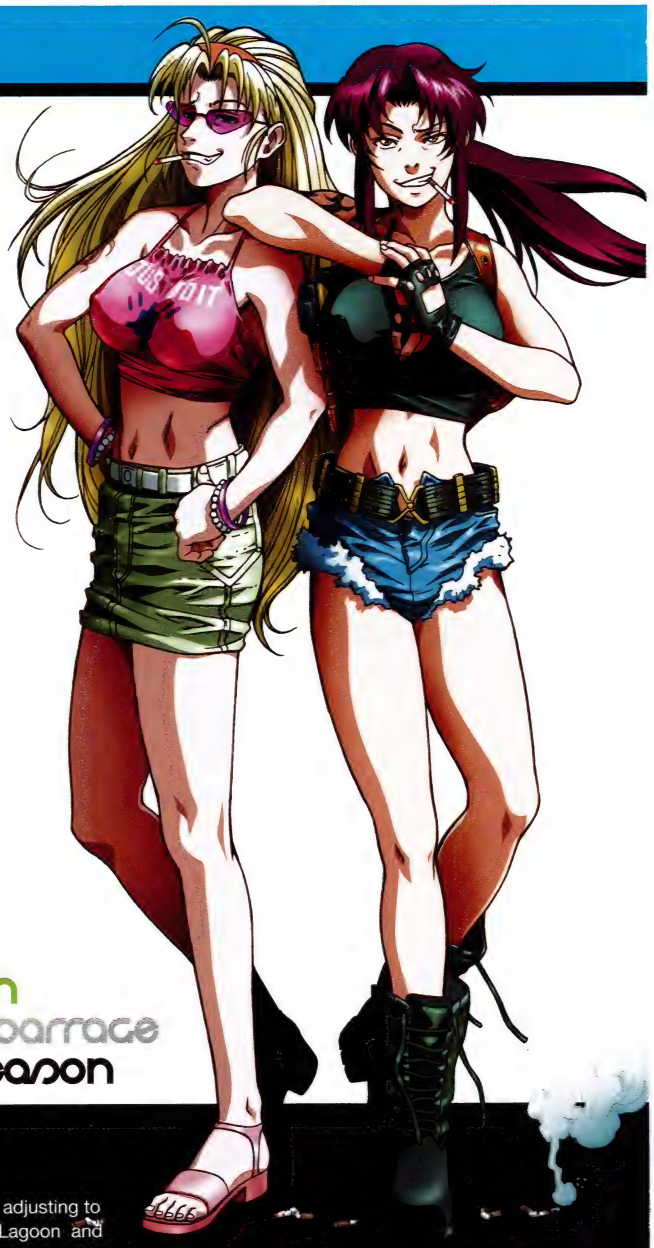
Cavalcade of Collections

Why buy the milk when you can own the cow?

part 1

words Dave Halverson & Bill Gray

FUNimation has been very, very busy since they bailed out the anime industry releasing collection after collection of top notch anime series' originally licensed by Geneon and ADV Films. It would have taken years to release so much anime in the traditional volume by volume manner, so they've done us all a solid and released many a great series in thin pack or box collections, as well as a few collected series of their own. There's never been so many great collections on store shelves at once. Over the next two issues we'll be breaking them down one by one. Keep an eye out for our online edition too, featuring trailers and episodes on these and many more titles both new and old at www.playmagazine.com.



Tokyo Majin

Episodes: 14 (Part One) / **Episodes:** 12 (Part Two)
Rating: TV MA

Why is it imperative that you watch all 26 episodes of Tokyo Majin? Well, does your idea of a good time involve demonic encounters, intense scenes of extreme violence, or the occult? Yeah? Okay, now throw in five distinctly different high school seniors charged with putting the kibosh on the apocalypse, including a pair of martial arts maniacs, the captain of the wrestling team, the beautiful student council president, and the girl most likely to save Tokyo with a bow and arrow, and you've got the makings of one seriously unhinged freakshow. Seriously though, I live for great character design and the soul-sucking monstrosities in Tokyo Majin and their puppet masters are some of the most original and finely animated in all of TV land. It's also among the most polished and well-animated series to come out of Japan this decade. Imperative I say.

Black Lagoon
The Second Barrage
Complete Season

Episodes: 13-24
Rating: 16+

Salaryman Rock is still adjusting to life aboard the Black Lagoon and its colorful mercenary company by the time the second season gets rolling, but he has no idea what's in store for him on the streets and waterways of Roanapur. From taking on a pair of "vampire" twins named Hansel and Gretel (though it's hard to tell which is which!), to a chainsaw-wielding bounty hunter and a dozen of his friends, to a personally shattering trip back to Japan, Rock begins to understand more about himself and the mercenary life that was thrust upon him.

The Second Barrage stays true to its manga roots while remaining eminently accessible to non-anime fans. Indeed, when I'm trying to get a guy to watch a "starter" anime series, I usually have to choose between Black Lagoon and Cowboy Bebop. I am also continually (and pleasantly) surprised at the above-average pacing of the show. Story arcs take about three to five episodes to resolve, leaving plenty of time for lots and lots of fast-paced action, and even a little philosophy now and then. The final arc, where Rock returns home to Japan with Revy, is a masterpiece of action anime, and a fitting end to The Second Barrage. The capstone fight between Revy and a yakuza assassin (don't want to give away too much of the plot!) is a particular delight.

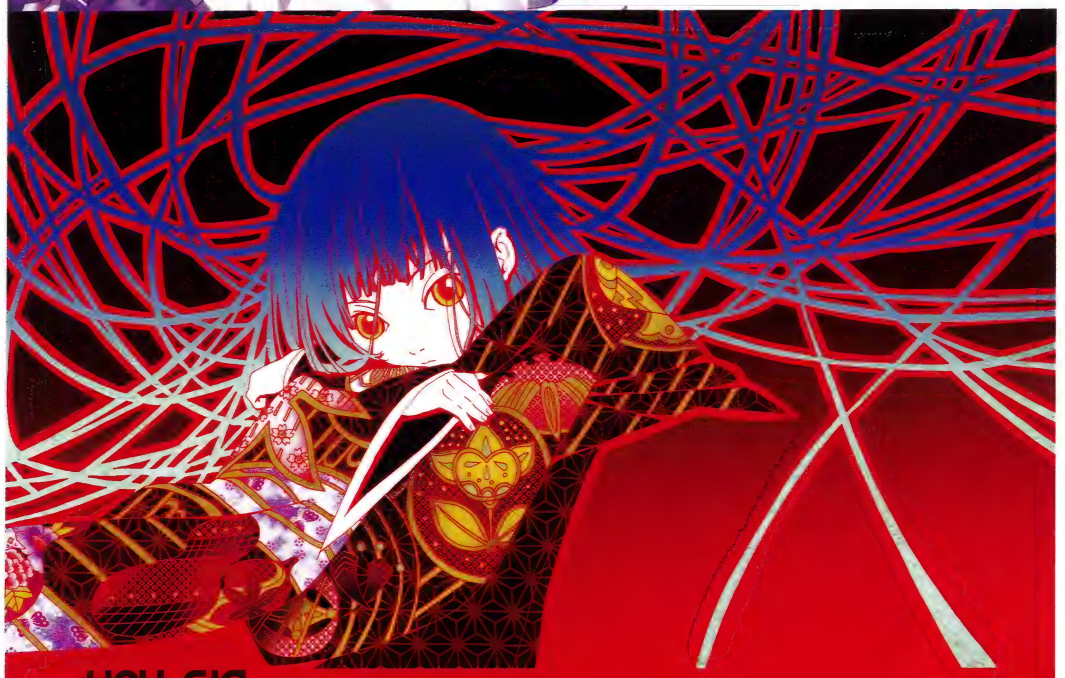
Now all we can do is cross our fingers and hope for a third season.

La Chevalier D'eon box set

Episodes: 1-24
Rating: TV-14

Lovingly set in 18th Century Paris, Le Chevalier D'Eon is a sumptuous blend of mystery, action, and period piece—that is, if the period featured murderous, mercury-filled zombies as well. After his older sister Lia is found floating in a casket in the Seine with the words "Psalms" on it as the only clue, young D'Eon de Beaumont becomes obsessed with finding the truth behind her death. The search will take him to the highest levels of French society, and have him crossing swords with all manner of evil creatures at the same time, all in fine swashbuckling fashion.

Le Chevalier was one of the best anime released back 2007, but because of the turmoil in the anime industry you may have missed it. Pick up the box set and prepare to be enthralled.



Hell Girl Complete Series Box Set

Episodes: 1-26
Rating: TV MA

Murders, stalkers, jealous classmates, and callous veterinarians beware: your days are numbered if you continue in your wanton ways. Through the Hell Correspondence, even the lowliest person can contract with Ai Enma, Hell Girl, to send you straight to the lake of fire. Of course, they have to be willing to condemn their own immortal soul to Hell in the process—but they get the chance to live out the rest of their lives however they choose.

Consisting mainly of short vignettes centered around stories of extreme injustice, where the unjust party usually gets their comeuppance, Hell Girl is more than a scare-a-minute horror. Rather, the individual cases shown build a better picture of Hell Girl and why she and her team do the things they do, as well as (briefly!) touching on Ai's past from time to time.

J-List Theater

002: Tsundere Mother

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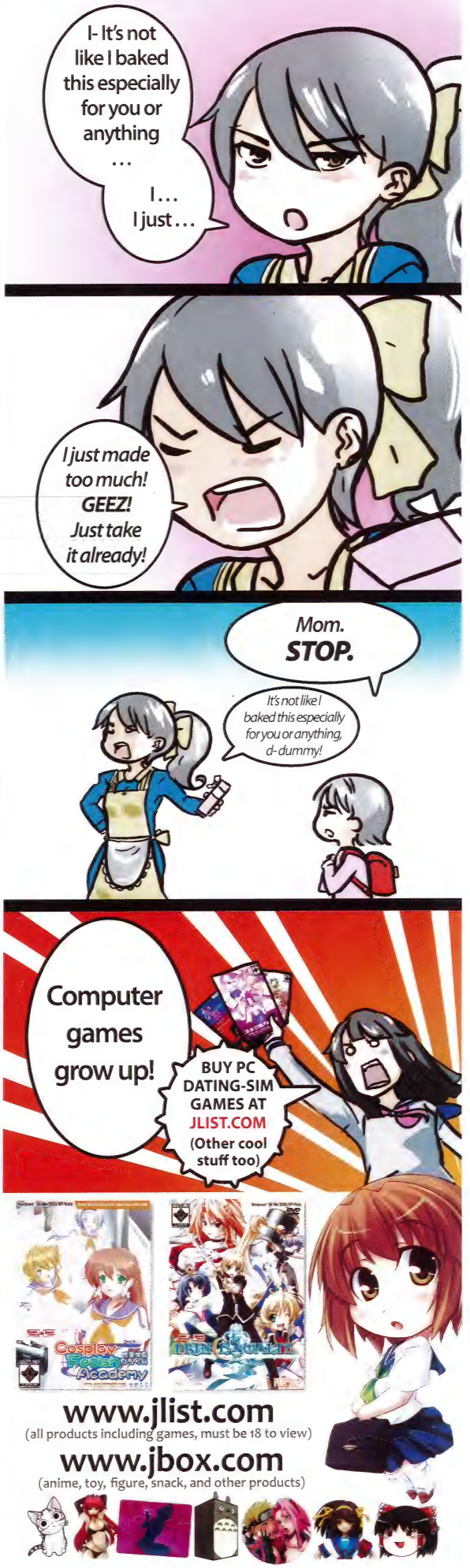
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Mom. STOP.
It's not like I baked this especially for you or anything, d-dummy!
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STR.A.IN.
(Strategic Armored Infantry)
The Complete Series

Episodes: 13 (2 DVDs)
Rating: TV MA

Among the stacks of collected series we sifted through this past month STR.A.IN. was the surprise of the lot. It's gotten to the point where if I see a giant robot on the box I'm reluctant to cut through the security seal for fear of another cliché of a cliché. But STR.A.IN. is a far cry from the hackneyed masses featuring teenagers in heat piloting giant robots to save the earth from alien invaders (who always start with Tokyo). STR.A.IN. tells the story of Sara Werec, an ace pilot-in-training following in the footsteps of her beloved brother Ralph to become a "Reasoner," (the Top Gun for mech pilots) right up until he launches a surprise attack on her school and kills everyone she loves...heavy stuff. Studio Fantasia do a good job folding their traditional animation into the CGI battles and manage to muster some unique mech designs in the process.

Xenosaga The Animation
The Complete Collection

Episodes: 12 (2 Discs)
Rating: TV 14

As video-game based anime goes Xenosaga is better than most, due largely to the story based on Xenosaga Episode I: Der Wille zur Macht for PS2, but even more so for the character designs from Nobuteru Yuuki, whose body of work includes such timeless anime like The Vision of Escaflowne, Heat Guy J, Noein, Battle Angel Alita and Captain Harlock and games such as Chrono Cross, Legend of Mana and Tail Concerto. Of course it doesn't hurt that the weapon at the heart of the story, KOS-MOS, happens to be as beautiful as she is deadly. Toei animation also really know how to stretch a dollar when it comes to the give and take of series anime through well integrated CGI and ratcheting up the animation in all the right places, which not surprisingly usually involves our titular WMD.

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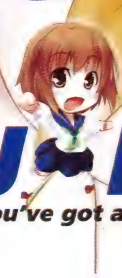

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Utawarerumono
Complete Collection

Episodes: 26 (4 discs) / **Rating:** TV 14

The anime with the unpronounceable name makes its box set debut—and I must say it took long enough to get here. Now I can finally find out what the devil Haku's hiding behind that mask of his that's permanently attached to his face!

One of the best (and only!) fantasy anime to come out in recent years, Utawarerumono was another title lost on the ash heap during the great anime consolidation of recent years. Utawa combines cute, if slightly clichéd, characters; action-packed sword and sorcery battles; and the occasional dose of fanservice, making for an addictive, well-paced series.

Ghost Hunt: Season 1

Episodes: 1-13; 13-25 (Parts 1 and 2) / **Rating:** Not Rated

After an unlucky accident, high schooler Mai Taniyama gets roped into helping exorcise an old classroom with Kazuya Shibuya, owner of Shibuya Psychic Research. Though possessing no "paranormal" powers, Kazuya succeeds in the task with Mai's help, and the two of them work together on more cases while we learn more about Mai's and Kazuya's past.

What makes Ghost Hunt work is its rare mix of horror, ensemble comedy, and a light love story. The other "exorcists," consisting of a laid-back Buddhist monk, a shrine maiden, and an Australian priest, provide some welcome comic relief. The suspense in GH can get intense at times, though not to the level of When They Cry, for example. Not as gory as The Grudge, and funnier than When They Cry, Ghost Hunt has something for everyone, provided you don't mind some scares now and again.

Shin Chan
Season 2

Episodes: 1-25 (Parts 1 and 2) / **Rating:** TV MA

Crude. Nasty. Just plain mean. And wickedly funny. Centered around a bratty kid and his dysfunctional family Shin Chan continues to lower the bar for "anime" comedy in his second season—and that's a good thing. FUNimation took a bit of a risk dubbing the original Crayon Shin-chan away from a literal translation. They hired a crack team of comedy writers to watch the imagery and rewrite the script, cramming as many American-style jokes into it as possible. Dirty American-style jokes. The kind that either make you wince, or laugh so hard you pee your pants a little. And the trademark scrawly, ugly animation somehow makes them that much funnier—maybe because you don't expect something that outrageous to come out of the mouths of characters that look like children's drawings.

Shin Chan is pure comedy gold.

009-1
The Complete Collection

Episodes: 12 + 1 Bonus / **Rating:** TV MA

One of my favorite series of 2007, 009-1 incorporates the unmistakable character designs of the late great manga artist Shotaro Ishinomori (check the photo on the money in episode 8) with James Bond (circa the cold war) camp. It's all about super spies and super capers, packed wall to wall with over the top villains, and gadgets galore, including Mylene Hoffman (009-1) herself, the top agent in the all-female Number 9 Group; a Western Bloc Intelligence Organization charged with keeping the world safe from megalomaniacs like Ivan Godunov, an Eastern Bloc war monger with an insatiable appetite for power. You'd never know by looking at her (and you get plenty of chances; Mylene's from the "sleep together now ask questions later" school of espionage) but she's nearly all cyborg, from her earring communicators to her 9mm nipple guns. For a good time call 009-1.

One Piece
Season One

Kurau: Phantom Memory
Complete Series

Episodes: 1-24 / **Rating:** TV-14

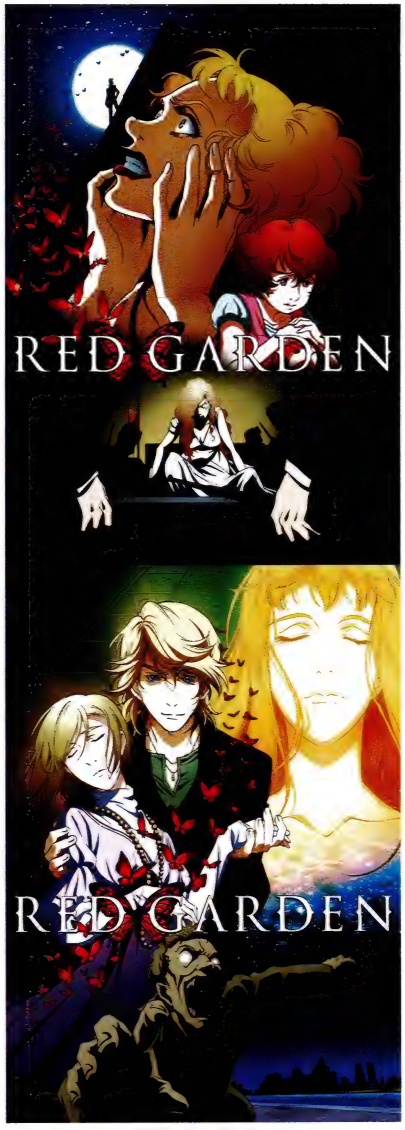
After an experiment by her scientist father goes awry, Kurau Amami finds herself with fantastic powers, such as the ability to fly, disintegrate objects, or even walk through walls. Kurau fused with an energy being known as Rynax, which literally re-created her into a new being, partially human and partially Rynax. Because the fusion process typically results in madness and slow death, Kurau and her friend Christmas find themselves hunted by the government, even though all they want is to be able to live in peace.

Thought-provoking and well-paced, Kurau is a somewhat more cheerful vision of the future than Ergo Proxy, though certainly less stylish. You may have overlooked this series, as it was another of ADV's titles that got signed over to FUNimation, but it's definitely worth a second, or even a third, look.

witchblade the complete season

Episodes: 24 episodes plus bonus disc and 6 art/interview booklets / **Rating:** TV MA

In this completely original take on Witchblade; the product of a collaboration between Gonzo and Top Cow, the cursed gauntlet binds itself to one Masane Amaha; a well-meaning, somewhat clumsy single mom who doesn't remember a thing before she was found with her baby unscathed at the epicenter of the devastating earthquake that leveled Tokyo. We catch up with Masane and daughter Rihoko six years later as she returns to Tokyo with child welfare on her tail—which very soon will be the least of her problems. Over the course of the series Masane is torn between the corporation that pays her to wield the Witchblade and making a proper home for Rihoko, which isn't so easy when you're dodging crazed Cloneblades and murderous humanoid abominations. It's easy to mistake Witchblade as just another jiggle fest, although it's quite the opposite. The action is off the chain and the Masane's alter ego does like to flash the booty, but more often Witchblade is a tragic and heartfelt story...honest.



red garden collections 1 & 2

Eps: 22 incl. OVA Dead Girls / **Rating:** TV MA

Kate, Rachel, Rose, and Claire attend the same private school, although socially they couldn't be farther apart. Kate comes from a rich family and is a member of the elite all-girl committee "Grace" that lords over the student body; Rachel is popular, dresses in all the cool clothes and hangs out with all the beautiful people; Claire is rough around the edges, street smart, and lives on her own in a low-rent apartment; and Rose is a shy, under-developed girl who's taking care of her two younger siblings while her mother is in the hospital. The one thing they do have in common is that they were all murdered on the same night, in the same place, and then reanimated on to identical, soulless bodies. And if that's enough, the only way they can keep from disappearing altogether is by killing monsters with their bare hands for their new masters. Oh yeah, and that's nicking the surface. File Red Garden under "hard to watch but impossible to ignore." Once you get started this series will own you.

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Final Fantasy VII Advent Children Complete Cloud Black PlayStationÆ3

$649.99 Play-Asia.com

Ok Final Fantasy fans, it is time to step up to the plate and empty out those wallets (and possibly your entire bank account). SCEJ recently released the Final Fantasy VII Advent Children Complete Cloud Black PlayStationÆ3 (try saying that 3 times fast) for the staggering price of 49,980 yen (that's $505 USD). Since most of us don't have a direct link to Japanese retailers who are willing to part with this gem for its suggested retail price, chances are you're going to have to shell out a few more clams-try $100 more. Still reading? Good.

This gorgeous flat-black PS3 comes packaged with Advent Children Complete on Blu Ray, FF XIII Trial Version (the demo that everyone has been drooling over), a 160GB hard drive and is branded with the "Cloudy Wolf" logo right smack dab on the top of the system. So if you have an unquenchable thirst for all things Final Fantasy and can live with playing anything but Region 1 games and films, then my friend this PS3 belongs in your home, or safely locked away with the rest of your FF booty.

Creative Vado HD Portable Video Cam

$229.99 - www.creative.com

If you've been to any videogame, anime or comic convention, you know first-hand about all of the bizarre, out of this world, "you just had to be there" moments that can go down at the drop of a hat, or should I say cape? And if you return to tell your friends about your wild night with the Baroness and Slave Leia, but don't have any hard, physical evidence to support your claims, then all you have bestowed upon them is lukewarm fan fiction that coincidently resembles one of my own fantasies. This is exactly the reason why you should never attend any convention or event without the Vado HD Pocket Video Cam from Creative. The handheld device is small enough to fit in your pocket or in the palm of your hand and can capture up to two hours of 720p (1280x720) high-definition video, 4 hours of HD or up to 8 hours of VGA standard definition footage. Use the attached flexible USB tab and plug the device directly into your computer for instant playback and editing through the pre-installed software, or use the included HDMI cable and plug the device directly into your HDTV for 1080i playback. The device also features a wide-angle lens, a crisp and colorful 2" diagonal screen as well as a rechargeable/removable battery that can hold a charge for up to 2 hours. So whether you're headed to a family reunion or the next big convention, be sure you don't leave home without the Creative Vado HD Portable Video Cam.

Nightmare on Elm Street Freddy Krueger Animated Maquette

$124.99/$89.99 – www.entertainmentearth.com

"There's something refreshingly new and different about you Freddy Krueger. Is it a new sweater? No, that's not it. Perhaps you've ditched that old blood and sweat stained fedora for a new one? No, that's not it either. Well whatever it is, you sure are looking quite *animated* these days."

With a remake of Wes Craven's cult-classic slasher film, *A Nightmare on Elm Street* set to release in April of 2010, Freddy has got to get back in the swing of things. And what better way to get on top of his game than by sneaking up on an unsuspecting teenager? Not only is she the perfect candidate for Freddy, but she's a Camp Crystal Lake counselor too! Score one for Team Krueger.

Let's just hope for her sake that she wakes up on time. "Wake up girlie, wake up!"

Now you can make your dreams of owning this Gentle Giant-sculpted statue a reality by heading on over to www.entertainmentearth.com. Once there you can choose from the brunette victim ($124.99) or the EE exclusive, blonde victim ($89.99). Both statues stand 7" tall and come with a certificate of authenticity.

Medicom Metal Gear Solid Action Figures

$18.99 - www.entertainmentearth.com

If you're like me and grew up playing Metal Gear on the NES all those years ago, it really is hard to believe just how far Snake has come since the 8-bit days of yore. Now you can celebrate the 20th anniversary of Metal Gear with these highly-detailed 7" figures from Medicom. Each figure comes with extra accessories so you can customize your play-time experience. Hey, come to think of it, seeing as how its the 20th anniversary of Metal Gear, shouldn't we be seeing some MG themed china or platinum figures instead? Come on Konami, don't you love us anymore?

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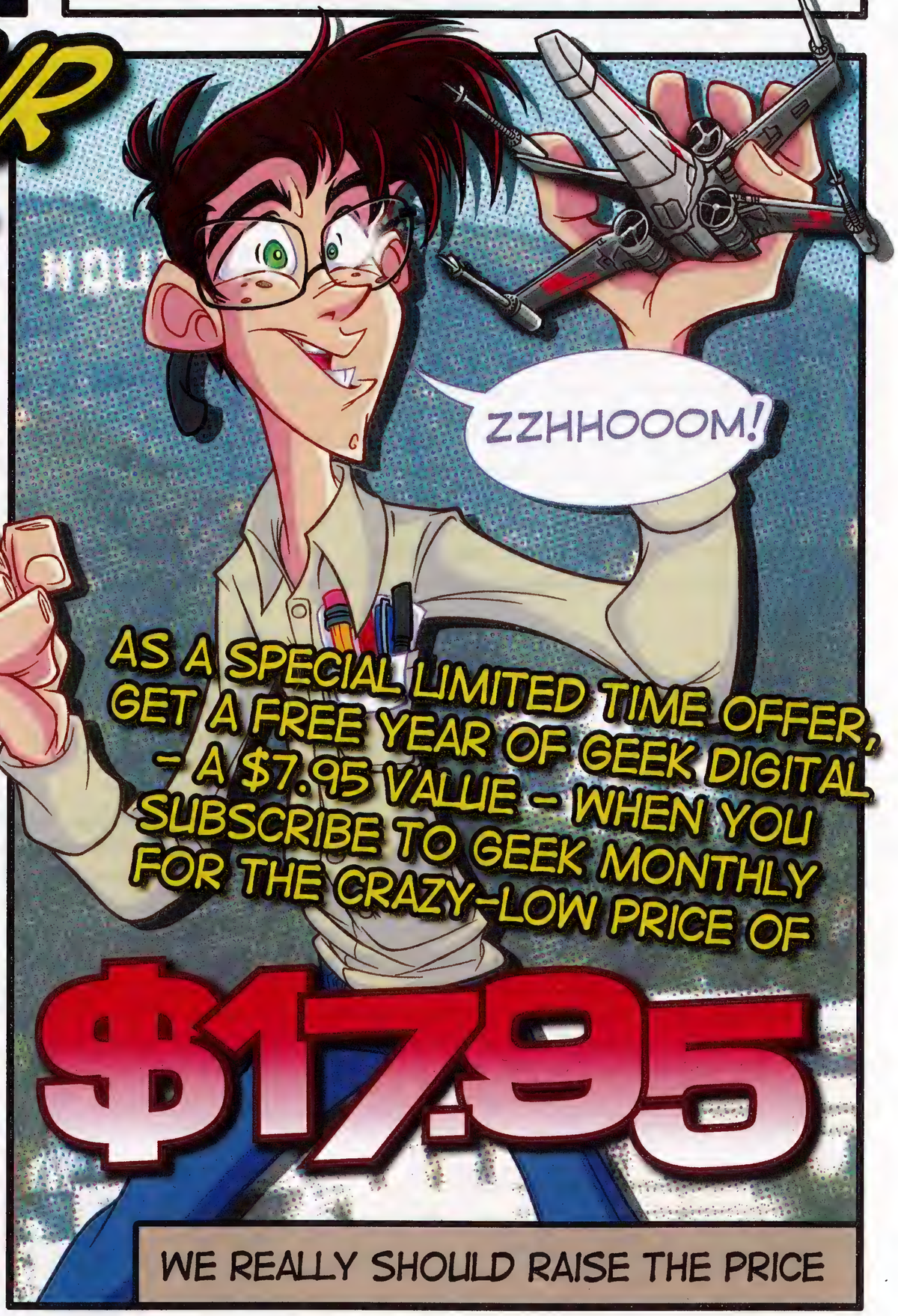

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DVD

Sin City Blu-ray

Studio: Dimension Films

In 2005, Robert Rodriguez tested the limits of digital cinematography with Sin City, but I'd argue that few have been able to truly examine the end result until recently, when the film debuted for the first time on Blu-ray. Looking better than virtually anything we've yet seen in the high-definition format, Rodriguez' magnum opus arrives in a two-disc set featuring two versions of the film, every extra or featurette already available, and several new special features that are exclusive to the high-definition format. While it's debatable which version is better (I prefer the streamlined theatrical cut, but am grateful to have the expanded version with complete adaptations of each storyline), the fact that everything is collected in one place cannot be overestimated in value, both in terms of saving shelf space in one's collection and being able to examine each and every intimate detail of the production. **Todd Gilchrist**

Cat in the Brain

Studio: Grindhouse Releasing

As a forward-thinking piece of meta-moviemaking, Lucio Fulci's *Cat in the Brain* is a fascinating deconstruction of the effects of horror movies on audiences, filtered through the eyes of no less than the director himself. But as a murder mystery, Fulci's film is guilty of mining the same conventions it attempts to criticize, thanks largely to lackluster plotting and a clip-show structure that mines from the filmmaker's previous work without really building upon it. Regardless, it's fascinating to watch a filmmaker examine – even unsuccessfully – the relationship between a creator and his work, as Fulci does here by fictionalizing his own dilemma when his ideas for gruesome spectacle start showing up in moments of his everyday life. Thankfully, Grindhouse Releasing's glorious transfer highlights its appreciable visual attributes, and provides a wealth of background information via two discs, three essays and multiple interviews with cast and crew members. **Todd Gilchrist**

Protégé

Studio: Dragon Dynasty

Those seeking wall-to-wall Hong Kong action from Derek Yee's *Protégé* may find the end result too introspective for their caffeinated tastes; there's nary a gunfight in sight in the award-winning 2007 feature, but the emotional violence wreaked on its characters leaves as many bodies in its wake as a John Woo bullet ballet. Daniel Wu is top-billed as an narcotics officer working undercover in aging drug lord Andy Lau's heroin business; Wu struggles with Lau's fatherly regard for him, especially in the face of neighbor Fan (Zhang Jing Chu), whose life hangs in the balance due to her addiction to Lau's product. The internal pressures exerted on Wu collide with the external threat of discovery, forcing him to decide where his loyalties truly lie. Though at times a bit too cold to generate a true audience connection, Yee's direction is confident, and the cast solid enough to warrant comparisons to such Stateside police dramas as *Donnie Brasco* or *Rush*. Dragon Dynasty's DVD is typically heavy with extras, including interviews with the cast, making-of documentaries, and informative commentary by Bey Logan. **Paul Gaita**

Tokyo Zombie

Studio: Anchor Bay

Based on a popular manga, this doggedly offbeat black comedy from Sakichi Sato (author of Takashi Miike's *Ichi the Killer*) is a unique Japanese spin on traditional zombie features and slacker buddy comedies that for the most part, delivers both the gore and the goofs required from both. *Ichi* star Tadanobu Asano and *Gozu*'s Sho Aikawa (wearing a truly atrocious bald cap) are a couple of hapless minimum wage types who accidentally kill their boss during a less-than-lucid moment. They dispose of the body in Black Fuji, a foul mound of garbage in the middle of Tokyo, only to discover that the toxic waste contained in the pile is bringing the numerous corpses stashed under it back to life. The picture then veers sharply into apocalypse territory, with society on the verge of collapse and pit fights between zombies and humans the entertainment of the day; the sheer volume of slapstick and absurdity trickles out at this point, which may turn off those charmed by the film's lighter first half. Still, the dim-bulb relationship between Asano and Aikawa should generate enough amusement, as will many of the over-the-top, taste-be-damned sight gags. Two hours of supplements are included, most notably a lengthy making-of and numerous interviews with the cast and crew. **Paul Gaita**

Star Trek
The Original Series - Season 1

Studio: Paramount Home Entertainment

While its arrival on Blu-ray was no doubt timed to capitalize on the visibility of J.J. Abrams' franchise reboot, the feature film may ultimately pay dividends to Star Trek's origins on television. The Original Series continues to be a fount of entertainment and inspiration, and this Season 1 set offers ample evidence that with creativity and imagination, big budgets and a-list stars are unnecessary to take audiences where no man has gone before. The complete-season collection features alternate (optional) updated special effects for folks who thought the original ones were hokey, but it's bonus materials, including text commentaries, featurettes and interviews, that really enhance and sharpen the viewing experience. Whether you're experiencing the show for the first time or revisiting it in a new format, this set offers the finest presentation of *Star Trek* that's ever been seen—whether Abrams' film ranks as your final frontier as a fan, or just your first. **Todd Gilchrist**

HERO: 108 水火外傳 ORIGINS

Snipe This!

Hero:108's Lin Chung Can't Miss

gamania MoonScoop

Last month "Play Magazine" sneaked you a story on the upcoming MMOG and animated TV series, "Hero:108." We pulled a few strings and managed to convince the creative team to open their vaults and give us another page in the saga of Lin Chung – the series' ultimate sniper. Here, Lin Chung demonstrates his uber-firing skills and his propensity for being misunderstood.

See, this rebel Hero – number 006 – is a guy who, like most gamers, lives by his own code. He doesn't give a flying you-know-what about what the other guy thinks. Or that you might label his passion for painting a wee bit…umm…metro. If you mess with Lin Chung, you will most likely go home in more than one piece. For more info on Lin Chung and the Hidden Kingdom of "Hero:108," the creators at Gamania Digital Entertainment, Moonscoop, and Cartoon Network International, check out www.hero108.tv. And, look for the series launch later this year on Cartoon Network!

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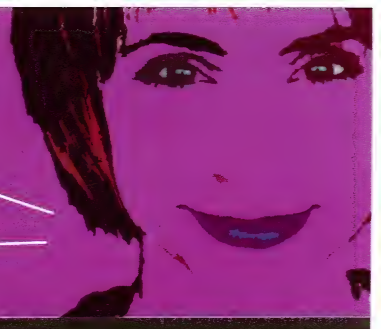

BACK OF THE BOOK

06_09 HEATHER CAMPBELL
EXECUTIVE EDITOR

Faster than Lightning

"Caught the flu from Nintendo. Done got shot by Sony. And Microsoft dug my grave."

I was at Ground Kontrol Classic Arcade in Portland, Oregon last weekend, and when I wasn't playing Street Fighter III, I was on the second floor tapping away on their large selection of pinball machines. After more than an hour spent playing rounds against my friends, it suddenly struck me that I was staring at nothing less than the savior of the arcade.

To figure out why the arcade is dead, we have to look no farther than our own television sets. By now, most living room flat-screens are larger than arcade cabinets. Even Street Fighter IV, with its ridiculous HD set-up, is smaller than a hotel television. Under our big black LCDs are one-to-three gaming machines, each of which offer arcade experiences without any of the noise, smell, or gum of the arcade. Even better, you pay once, and then you play.

Online gaming kicks our old friend the arcade one more time, really giving it one in the gut, by providing endless matches against like opponents. Take that, two-player machine; we can play MAG with two-hundred something people.

The death of the arcade is memorialized with an obvious epitaph. It reads: "Caught the flu from Nintendo. Done got shot by Sony. And Microsoft dug my grave."

But I still miss it. I miss the arcade. We're tired of hearing it out of me. It's not some rosy nostalgia that tugs at me, nor is it a case of simply wanting what I can't have. Arcades provided one thing that the online-ready console gaming experience just can't capture, and that's *seeing* the asshole who just beat you. Or better, seeing their expression when you beat them back.

And so, here I was on the top floor of the Ground Kontrol Classic Arcade, shrieking at the jerks who were handing me my hat on rounds of Pirates of the Carribean (Nic, Cale -- you're not *actually* jerks), and I realized that it wasn't just the face-to-face antagonism that was driving us. We were having fun, *because* we were playing Pinball. Pinball, you see, is constant novelty.

Pinball can't be replicated in the living room. Pinball is a unique, randomized experience that requires a large footprint and attentive upkeep. Sure, there's virtual pinball, but there's also digital pornography, and few would trade real sex for an animated GIF. Pinball is analogue. And because it's based in the tiny imperfections of reality, it is limitless. Pinball is the water droplet, and we're about to ride into Jurassic Park. Which, by the way, is my favorite pinball machine. Jurassic Park had awesome backglass, and the art under the playfield had the single-color contrast of an old comic book. There was a six-ball multi-mode, appropriately called "Chaos!" Even the speakers were sharp, colored in like the film's yellow icon. And I fondly recall the sound of a Sam Neill sound-alike screaming, "The T-Rex is Loose!!" sometime before your ball was devoured by the decapitated head of a dinosaur.

A round of Jurassic Park pinball would end with the far-off call of a Brachiosaurus. The machine shook when there was a stampede. And you could shoot and kill a raptor with the gun-shaped launcher. It would walk across the orange video display, and then it would explode. Nothing beats an exploding dinosaur. Except maybe a talking one. I hear that Twilight Zone and Addams Family are better pinball machines. Twilight Zone has a lot more options--the entire playfield is littered with stuff to do. But what person in their right mind likes The Addams Family movie over Jurassic Park? Addams Family has ... a hand. Jurassic Park has a scientist yelling, "IAN, FREEZE!"

When is that movie coming out on Blu-Ray?

Anyway, a pinball comeback would save the arcade. The question is, how can we pull people back into the arcades again to play pinball? How do you make an arcade cool enough to become a hang out? Well, Ground Kontrol seems to have it figured out. There's a bar. They card when you come in. And they keep their machines in pristine condition. As my friend Jordan Morris put it in San Francisco a couple days later, "I haven't played Third Strike on a stick that tight since the 90's."

Upstairs, they have clean, sharp, functional pinball machines. Someone there loves those units, and it shows. There's no graffiti cut into the glass. There's no delay on the flippers. The coins give you credits, every time. And the sound is turned way up, so you can hear the pre-recorded voices shouting out, "MULTIBALL!!" or "HIIIiiiiideeee-Ho!" Who knows? Maybe hipsters in Hollywood will surprise us and take up pinball, like New Yorkers in the 90's with their Hush Puppies. With a sudden influx of people into these Barcades, we'll get a resurgence that fuels an interest in one-on-one versus video-games. Maybe pinball, with its delicate and tangible experience, can be the backbone of a get-out-of-the-house gaming movement. Pinball: It's the next Pool Table. All we have to do is wait for someone to feature it in a heist movie. Soderbergh, I'm staring at you. Anderson's a given. He loves that retro stuff.

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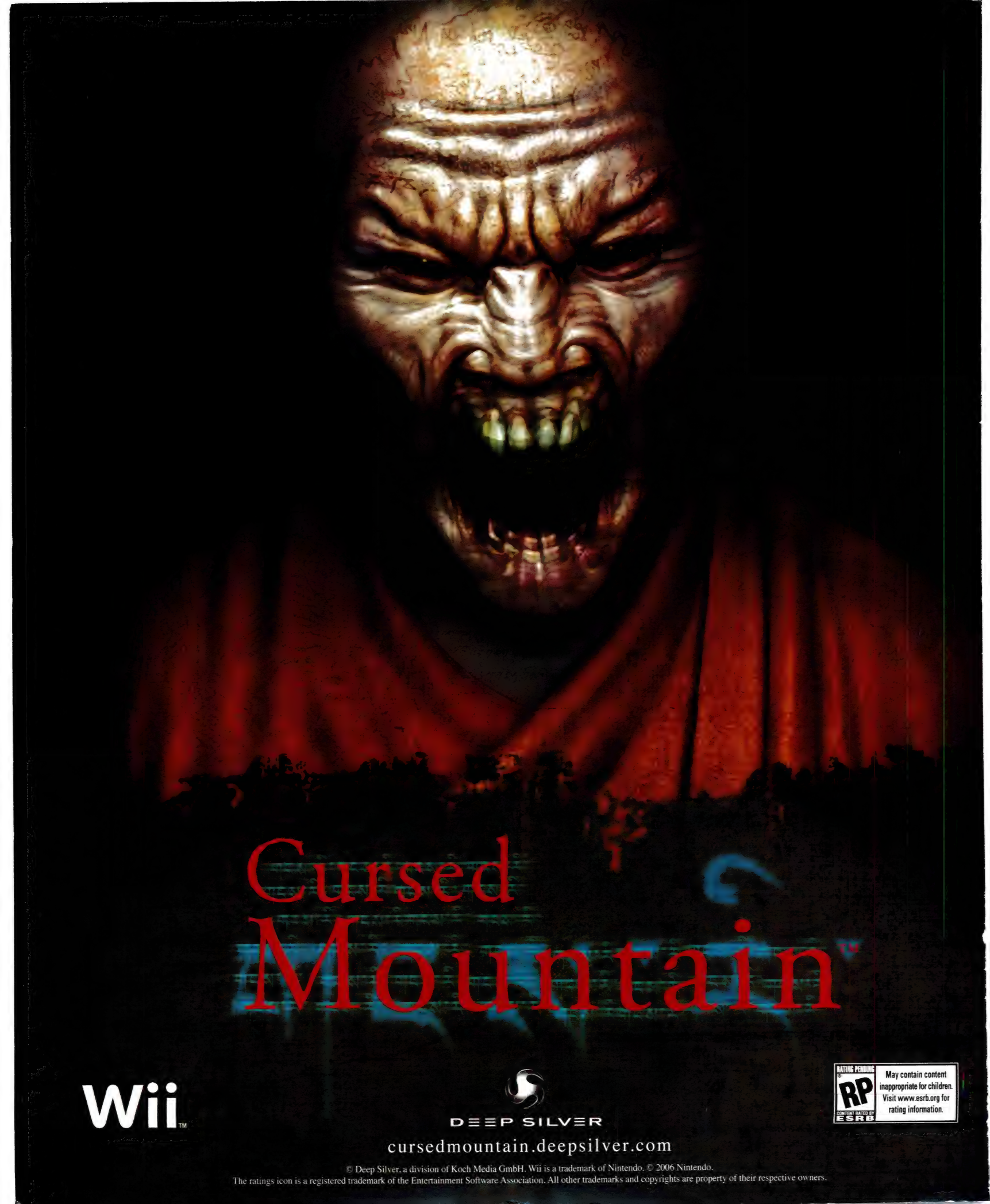

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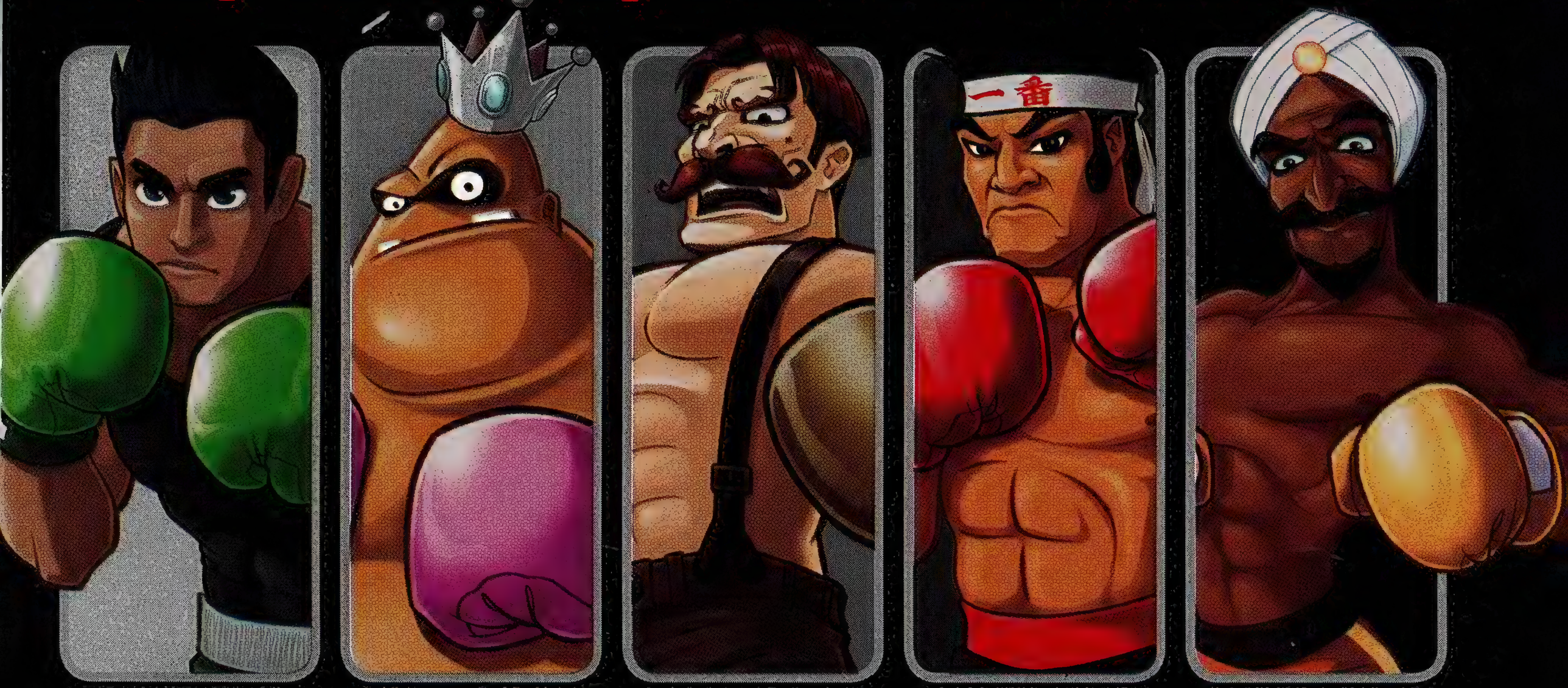

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CONTENT RATED BY ESRB

Cartoon Violence
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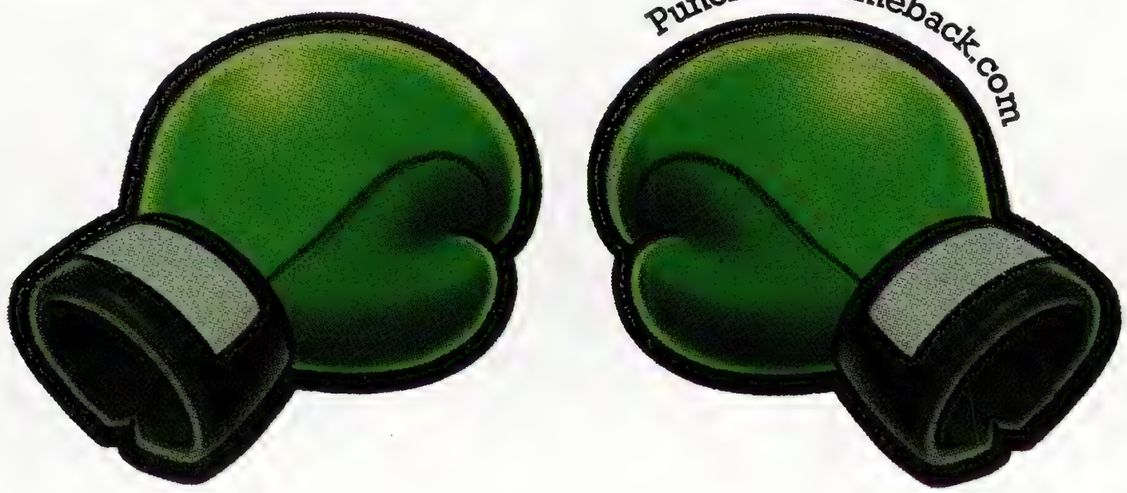

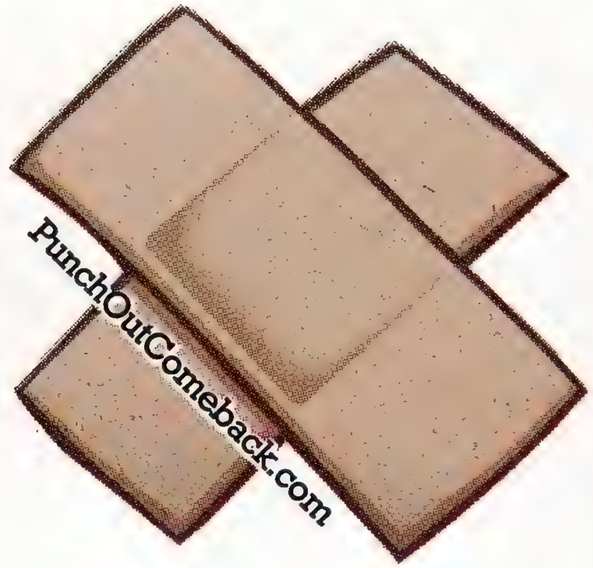

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